Guitar Strings and Keyrings are What it Takes to Build a Home

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Guitar Strings and Keyrings are What it Takes to Build a Home

by Anonymous

Summary

Techno was adopted by Phil when he was 12 years old.

He'd been enjoying his morning before Phil came to him asking if he would mind them taking in another kid. Against his better judgement, Techno agrees and ends up with two new foster brothers who he was determined to not get attached to, no matter what.

~*~

Another Tommy Foster AU but this time with Wilbur

Notes

Hello!

I know the Tommy Foster AU has been around for a while but I can't get enough of it so here we are.

All 10 chapters have a rough draft completed but need editing so I'm hoping to get them all out as quickly as I can!

Please please please look through the tags before reading. They have the possibility to be updated as I add more chapters so please keep and eye on them in case there's anything that changes. This work gets pretty heavy at times so be careful of anything in the tags and stay safe while reading.

Disclaimer: I am writing with the characters from the Dream SMP, not the content creators behind them. This is entirely a work of fiction and does not reflect them in any way and only serves as my interpretation of their characters. Please don't share this with any ccs. If any one of them mentions that they are uncomfortable with fanworks of this nature I will delete it immediately.

Chapter 1

Technoblade was an only child. For the first 12 years of his life, Technoblade didn't have parents or siblings, he'd come to terms with it – accepted it as his normal.

Philza was his ninth placement and he was promised it'd be his last – not that he believed it, every house he'd been in should have been permanent. His record had pages upon pages of behavioural issues and fights he'd allegedly started that adoption had long since been ruled out.

He wasn't one of the younger children, who were still full of childlike innocence, and even if a family *were* looking for an older child, he came with way too much emotional baggage to even be considered.

By the time he'd reached Phil's doorstep, he'd convinced himself he didn't even care anymore. He was quiet and liked his own company. As far as he were concerned, he didn't even need a family, they were way too overrated.

At previous homes he'd see the way certain kids would flock together and play. They'd spend so much time laughing and fighting, always loud and irritating. He wasn't particularly tall back then and there was no way he'd be able to fend off a pack of kids when they all banded together and made him a target.

 The parents weren't much better. They had favourites, of course they did, they'd clearly seen a number of kids come their way, it was only natural to like some better than others. Not that it made Techno's life any easier when trying to explain that he didn't smash the glass or put the TV remote through the flatscreen.

Needless to say when he arrived at the house of his new foster parent he hadn't expected much. In fact, he was sure that he'd be in and out in a matter of days but Phil had shattered every single preconception Techno had about what his ninth home would be like.

When Techno had shuffled into the kitchen fearfully, a B+ on his report card clutched tightly in his hands, Phil had burst into a smile. He was showered with congratulations and praise and the promise of his favourite for dinner. Techno was worried Phil had misread the card and despite trying to insist that he got a *B* not an A, Phil didn't care in the slightest. The man's smile was so genuine that Techno couldn't help but smile too and was surprised to find that he was actually rather happy about his grade after all.

Phil let Techno take up fencing lessons and made sure that he was sat in the front row where Techno could see him every time there was a tournament. It was strange to have somebody there watching and cheering him on but at the same time it finally felt like he was sharing his victories – like they meant something. If Phil was irritated by the Techno's recount on the way home he didn't show it, nodding early and telling him to 'go on'.

Techno was supposed to be gone by November. He'd never lasted this long in a house before since he was a baby and it was starting to take its toll on him. He'd gotten comfortable and

that terrified him more than anything.

He tried not to let it show on his face. If Phil found out then maybe it'd put the idea of ditching him in his head and Techno had enough sense not to sabotage the one good thing in his life.

On Christmas day, Techno had unwrapped a new foil, fencing mask and jacket as well as a stack of books. It was more than he'd ever owed in his life and there was so much of it. He'd try on his new fencing gear and then flick through the books, flitting between each one, unsure where to even begin but in the best possible way. There was also a beautiful copy of Greek myths that were likely a bit difficult for most kids his age but Techno wasn't even the slightest bit deterred by the tricky words or awkward pronunciation. He looked back at Phil, who was smiling softly and then asked Techno how he felt about adoption.

Several months later, Technoblade was officially his son. From then on Techno realised he wasn't on his own, he had Phil and Phil had him. They were a tiny little makeshift family but it was all Techno needed and it was more than he could possibly want.

That's why when Phil asked him how he'd feel if they took another kid in, he was rattled to say the least.

From his spot at the breakfast bar, Technoblade stiffened. He dipped his spoon into the bowl of rice krispies and idly pushed them around, watching the last few pieces float atop the milk.

"Why?"

"Well," Phil reached out and put a hand on his shoulder, ducking his head to try and find any sort of eye-contact. Unfortunately for him, Techno felt like being especially stubborn, refusing to look up from his breakfast. "I got a phone call wondering if I had space to take someone else in who really needs a home right now."

"Why does it have to be us?"

"We have the space and it'd be nice for you to have somebody aside from me to hang out with at home."

Techno's voice was quiet when he spoke again, "I like it just being us."

Phil smiled, squeezing his shoulder slightly. "I like it too but I think this kid really needs our help. He's 12 and been in and out of homes for a while. I think he just needs somewhere he can settle down for a bit."

Techno bit his lip, he knew that feeling, he'd been there before but he was here first. He'd seen other houses, he knew that parents played favourites and this kid was a good 4 years younger than him. He'd be lovably excitable and Phil would take to him instantly.

"Hey, Techno- mate, look at me a sec'."

He sighed quietly then carefully looked up at Philza, seeing him smile gently. It was the same look he'd seen on Christmas right before he asked to adopt him and then again when they'd

signed the papers and made it official.

"You know that even if we have another kid in the house – hell, even if we have a *hundred* kids in the house – you'll still be my son, right?"

Even now, years later it still felt surreal and that word alone was enough to get him emotional. He felt 12 years old again on Christmas morning, realising for the first time that he wasn't going anywhere – that he finally, *finally* had a family.

Techno tried to hide his smile behind his hand but judging by the playful shove on his shoulder, Phil seemed to notice anyway.

"Yeah, Dad, I know." He said and rolled his eyes. His tone was sarcastic but he knew Philza could see right through it.

They sat in comfortable silence for a few seconds while Techno chased the last of his cereal around the bowl.

"I, um, maybe it wouldn't be the *worst* thing in the world if you took another kid in."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure? Because at the end of the day this is your house too and if you'd rather I didn't-"

"No, no it's okay."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then, I'll let them know."

Techno hummed in response, tipping the bowl to his lips so he could drink the last of the milk before carrying it over to the sink.

To say he was nervous would be an understatement. Techno never did well in social situations and wasn't particularly popular at school, infamous would probably be a better word, he had something of a reputation for starting and finishing fights. Still, he knew he was a bit of a recluse and aside from his few friends, he was relatively isolated.

In his other homes, the mention of foster siblings came with a deep-seated feeling of dread. But Phil had been different from anyone else he'd ever met and the man hadn't wronged him yet, so even with the relentless thoughts swirling about his head, Techno allowed himself to feel cautiously optimistic about the kid.

Phil pulled up in the driveway of a large white house.

It was situated near a park and school with a few shops nearby. It was an ideal area for kids. There was enough going on so adults could hold down a job, while the various green patches could give children somewhere to run and play after school let out.

If Technoblade wasn't such an introvert, it probably would have been a nice area to stay but as far as he was concerned absolutely nothing could beat Phil's remote cabin of a house. It was so far and quiet that he could go on scenic walks and never have to worry about running into anyone he knew from school. There was the occasional dog walker wandering into the nearby woodland but he considered that one of the benefits, after all, he had been hinting to Phil about getting a dog for quite a while now. He's sure a dog would be much easier to handle than the kid Phil was picking up.

"You okay?" Phil asked turning to him.

Techno gave a stiff nod in return.

"Do you want to come inside, or wait in the car?"

"Nah, I'll come in."

He unbuckled his seat belt but did so with a numbness like he couldn't quite feel his fingers. He tried telling himself that they weren't even here for him but the sinking feeling in his stomach was nothing if not persistent.

Despite knowing he was safe, thoughts raced through his head that he was being abandoned again, that placement number nine was over and now he was being passed to his next family. He didn't want to go, Phil was his dad, Phil wouldn't just give him up but here they were and Techno tried to wonder what he had done wrong this time.

Technoblade was a rational person. He was a purveyor of logic and knew that Phil would never leave him. He was adopted for fuck's sake. Phil had promised that he had a family now and wasn't going anywhere but the childlike part of him was loud and persistent and made thinking clearly a hell of a lot harder.

Techno knew he wasn't a kid anymore but he was overcome with the feeling that he wanted to hold Phil's hand - to ground himself, to show that he wasn't going anywhere, that he was Phil's kid. Perturbed by his own thoughts, Techno buried his hands into the pockets of his jacket, though walked close enough to Phil so that occasionally their shoulders bumped into each other.

When they reached the door, Phil knocked and smiled brightly at Techno. Phil was scarily good at knowing when something was off and Techno didn't doubt that he'd been able to sense his nervous energy the whole drive over. Fortunately he was kind enough not to bring it

up. Techno dealt with his feelings in his own time with only the occasional prying from Phil when the man deemed it absolutely necessary.

The door swung open and Technoblade stiffened. A middle-aged woman stood in the doorway and Techno suddenly found his shoes to be particularly interesting, quite content to let Phil do the talking.

"Hello," she stuck out a hand, which Phil accepted with a smile. "Philza?"

"Phil is fine."

Techno then felt her eyes on him and he suddenly really wanted to head back and wait in the car.

"This is Techno, my son."

And there was that word again. Like magic it calmed his relentless thoughts and brought him back to reality.

The woman held out her hand for him too and then after only a moment of hesitation, Techno reached out and shook it weakly.

"It's great to meet you both, please come through – mind the mess it's almost impossible to keep it clean."

"It's no worries."

Techno felt Phil's hand on his back, gently shepherding him through the house.

It was so loud.

Techno was no stranger to group homes, it was where he mostly ended up when he started causing trouble at school and was no longer young enough for it to be endearing. Still, living with Phil in relative quiet was a stark contrast to the yells and shouts of children echoing off the walls and Techno found that he would really rather be at home, curled up with a book as Phil sang along to the radio while he made dinner.

They ended up in a home-office with papers strewn over every work surface. Empty mugs were balancing on top and Techno swore he caught a glimpse of a bowl of sweets somewhere amongst the chaos.

The lady pulled over two chairs for them as she sat at the opposite side of the desk and went through paperwork with Phil.

Techno had never been here for this part of the process and he probably would have been slightly curious if he weren't completely on edge. Even with the door shut, the ruckus from the rest of the house was only muffled and he was starting to worry they'd end up with someone obnoxiously loud.

Technoblade looked back at Phil who was filling out forms on a clipboard and nodding along to the woman as she spoke.

"-but he goes by Tommy most of the time. He's really friendly so I think he'd fit right in at any school he goes to. There are some behavioural issues you should be aware of-" She looked at Techno briefly. "-But they are all in his file so you can read through it later on when you've got a moment. I do have to tell you though that he has had a history of running away in the past, so keep an eye on him at the start just in case."

Techno felt that he was the reason most of this kid – Tommy's – dirty laundry wasn't brought up there and then but decided that was probably a good thing. The kid deserved whatever privacy he could get.

He was starting to feel bad for him already. Maybe having another kid around wouldn't be too bad, after all the similarities between him and Techno were already uncanny.

The lady took the clipboard back from Phil.

"This all looks good. I can go grab him now if you're ready to meet him?"

"That sounds great, thank you!"

The lady excused herself and Techno waited with baited breath. He glanced over at Phil and the guy was unfairly calm.

It took the lady a few minutes to return.

Phil had been frowning slightly as he looked from the door to the wall clock then back to the door again. Techno felt like he should say something, if only to ease the tension slightly but his mouth felt dry.

When the lady returned almost 5 minutes later, she looked considerably worse. Her lips were pressed in a thin line and there was a slight sheen of sweat on her forehead that Techno was sure hadn't been there before.

The kid she came in with did absolutely nothing to ease Techno's nerves. The kid was tall – taller than he'd been at age 12 and looked dishevelled for lack of a better word. His clothes were undeniably worn and the shoes on his feet looked to be several sizes too large. He had curly blonde hair and dark circles beneath his eyes.

Tommy kept his head down but was clearly gritting his teeth, hands curled into tight fists at his sides.

His body was rigid and poised as if he were about to attack or run away and Techno shifted slightly in his seat, feeling way too uncomfortable in the kid's presence.

Tommy looked up at the movement and very fleetingly Technoblade caught his eye. The kid looked downright murderous, like he was standing on the verge of lunging and Techno wanted more than anything to turn to Phil and tell him that his was a *really* bad idea.

The care worker spoke next, still standing next to the kid, almost expecting an outburst.

"This is Tommy, he'll be going home with you."

Tommy's head snapped up. "I'm not going anywhere."

It was more of a growl than anything else and that's when Technoblade knew that his was a bad idea. The kid was a lit stick of dynamite and he wanted himself and Phil nowhere near him when he blew up.

"Tommy," she said sternly in a way that left no room for compromise. "We talked about this. I've worked very hard to find you a family and Phil, here, is very kind to offer you a room."

"No, I don't want it. I'm staying there."

"Tommy you don't get a say here, we're doing what's best for you."

"No! No you have no idea what's best for me. You can't *do* this- you *can't*-"

The kid was loud – not to mention an entitled little shit. It was clear that Tommy wasn't interested in coming back with them and Techno didn't want the kid anywhere near his home.

"I'll find someone to go grab your bag."

She barely had the door cracked before Tommy's hand was forcing it shut with a slam.

"Please, please no – I'll be good, I promise. I'll study for class, I'll do chores, I don't *care* but please, please, please let me stay-"

The kid was clearly hysterical and on the verge of tears. Techno looked over at Phil who seemed sad? Surprised? Concerned? He couldn't tell. With any luck Techno thought he'd be reconsidering. They could head back to the car, Techno could stop worrying about having to share his house and maybe they'd grab a McDonald's on the way home.

Unfortunately for him, Phil had other plans.

"Hey, Tommy, I'm Phil and this is Techno we were looking to foster you if that's okay?"

Phil used his soothing voice, usually reserved for when Techno had nightmares or a particularly hard day at school. It had never failed to calm Techno down in the past but it seemed to have the opposite effect on Tommy.

The kid paled, shaking his head. "No no no. This isn't happening. You can't! I'm not-" he broke off into a chocked gasp but recovered quickly. "I'm not going."

The lady rolled her eyes and Technoblade realised that this probably wasn't the first time she'd had to deal with this.

"Come on, Tommy, look you're getting a new foster brother."

Tommy rounded on him quickly and Techno fought the urge to stand his ground. This was a kid after all but the way he looked at Techno was chilling. Tommy's blue eyes were fiery and his tone venomous when he spoke. "*He* is *not* my bother."

"Tommy! Don't say that!"

"I have a brother – *he* is not my family."

Techno didn't miss the way Phil jolted in his seat.

"You have a brother? Tommy I didn't know…"

"No, sorry for the confusion, Tommy is an only child-"

"Fuck you! Wil's my family, these people are not my family!"

"Who's Wil?" Phil asked, looking to Tommy but his care worker stepped in quickly.

"He's another boy we've got living here that Tommy's just gotten a bit attached to is all."

Tommy's eyes seemed to glaze over and for a minute Techno thought he might actually start crying.

"Could we see him?" Tommy and the social worker seemed equally stunned at Phil's request. "I mean, it might help make this a bit easier."

There was a second of silence that seemed to last forever.

"Of course," the lady shuffled past Tommy to the door, this time he let her open it. She leaned out into the hallway and called out amid the noise. "Wilbur! Can you come here for a minute?"

Footsteps could be heard outside the office, then a boy appeared in the doorway.

He was tall, grimly Techno realised this guy was taller than him. Despite his rather imposing height, he looked thin, almost to the point where it would be concerning. He had brown hair that fell in waves over one eye, which from what Techno could see, looked to be a hazel-brown.

"You wanted to see me?"

His accent was different too, Techno noted, and he lacked the blatant animosity of Tommy.

Wilbur looked around, from Phil and Techno to Tommy and seemed to need no explanation of what had just happened.

"Tommy here is just getting a bit upset about having to move and we were wondering if you could maybe help him out."

It wasn't a question but Wilbur still nodded dumbly as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. The kid was at his side in an instant.

"Tommy," he began softly. "What's wrong?"

"I *don't* want to go. They can't make me!"

Wilbur sighed and leaned down to look Tommy in the eye.

"You can't stay here. It's better if you go now and-"

"I am *not* going!" Tommy's voice cracked as he yelled, breaking off to desperately restrain sobs and Wilbur winced.

He turned to Techno and Phil. "I'm really sorry. He wants to go with you and he's really happy, it's just a bit scary at first." Tommy whined incoherently but Wilbur continued. "Come on, Tommy, I'll come with you to grab your bag, okay?"

He guided Tommy out the door and closed it quietly behind them. As soon as it clicked shut, Phil turned to the social worker who seemed to be nursing a headache.

"About Wilbur," she looked up at the sound of his voice. "Is he waiting for a foster family too?"

Techno felt his blood run cold. He glared at Phil, all subtly thrown out the window, he could see exactly where this conversation was going and was definitely not on board.

"Yes, unfortunately. We are always looking for new placements but it's sometimes a bit harder for older children. We try to focus on the ones we feel would benefit the most and Tommy can get a bit overwhelmed in such a big house with a lot of kids."

"Would I-" Phil looked at Techno who hoped the alarm on his face spoke for him. "Would I be able to look into fostering Wilbur too?"

Techno wanted to yell. To ask Phil what the fuck he was thinking. To remind him that he never agreed to taking in two kids – one was the deal.

The social worker looked taken aback but nodded. "If you have the room that shouldn't be a problem." She sat down at the computer typing away at her keyboard as the screen reflected in the curve of her glasses lenses. "Of course there's paperwork to fill out and we have to check over your details to make sure."

"Yeah, no problem."

There was a knock at the office door again and Wilbur gently pushed Tommy inside ahead of him. Wilbur passed him his bag but Tommy was refusing to look at him.

"I think we're all good to go now." He pulled Tommy into a hug, the kid stood there refusing to reciprocate. Wilbur let him go and muttered a "be good" into his hair before taking a step back.

"Um, Wilbur," the kid looked back at Phil with one hand on the door knob. "I know this is a bit sudden but there's room at home for one more if you would like to come with us."

He swallowed hard and blinked at Phil as if in disbelief. "Are you saying that you'd foster me too?"

"Yeah, if you're up for it. I have another bedroom and I don't want to split you and Tommy up if I can help it."

"That's- I- um, sorry – that's really generous. I'd love-"

Wilbur was cut off by Tommy yelling, lunging at him with a smile on his face.

"Seriously? You being serious right now?"

Phil laughed softly and nodded. "I am."

Tommy was babbling loudly and Techno could already tell the kid's voice would get on his nerves.

"Am I going now?" Wilbur asked looking from Phil to his social worker.

"If that's okay with Phil?"

"Yeah that's no problem, unless you want more time to pack and get ready?"

"No, no I'm good. Can I just grab some stuff really quick?"

"Yeah, sure, take your time."

Wilbur nodded and was out the door with Tommy at his back. The thunderous sound of their footsteps and joyous yelling could be heard right down the hallway.

Techno sat there, content to sulk as Phil filled out document after document and answered the lady's questions.

It wasn't fair. Phil hadn't mentioned anything about two kids and here they were. Techno hadn't even gotten a say in the matter, Phil didn't pull him to one side and ask what impression he got from the kid and now there was two of them – *two*.

From what he could tell, they were loud and obnoxious, especially Tommy, who Techno had taken an immediate disliking to.

Technoblade was self-aware enough to recognize that Phil was the best thing to ever happen to him. The man was beyond kind and always put others needs before his own. He'd always try his best, even for people who didn't deserve his kindness and that was something that irritated Techno more than anything. Tommy had straight up refused them. Phil had offered him a room and Tommy had said no, over and over again.

Tommy swung open the door this time, with Wilbur behind him. Both of them seemed to quieten down when back in the room but there was still a small smile that they tried uselessly to hide.

Phil finished up the last of the immediate paperwork, the social worker explained that she'd be in touch later to finalize everything and if there were any problems in the meantime to give her a ring.

"You guys ready?"

"Yeah," Wilbur answered for them both.

Phil then turned to Techno, who scowled in response but jerked his head in affirmation. The man had the decency to look a little guilty as he smiled cautiously down at him.

"Right then, let's go."

Phil lead them out into the hallway, noticing the large black case Wilbur was holding in both hands. The kid shuffled back nervously as if expecting some kind of comment about it and seemingly surprised when none came.

Techno followed Phil, letting Wilbur and Tommy lag behind, talking amongst themselves in hushed whispers. Techno tried not to think about it, focusing on the cold breeze and quiet of finally being outside after being stuck in a group home for the better part of an hour. He didn't remember it being that insufferable, he realised, not for the first time, that living with Phil had really softened him. He didn't have to over-think every word that came out of his mouth or worry about rationing his food. He was home and there was no way two kids he didn't know would ruin that for him.

Upon reaching Phil's car, Techno made a beeline to the passenger side door. Phil opened his mouth as if to say something then closed it and turned to Wilbur and Tommy instead.

"You can put your bags in the boot, it might give you both a bit more leg room."

"Sure."

Wilbur slid his black case in first though from watching the kid's reflection in the rear view mirror Techno could see the way he but his lip almost nervously. Tommy seemed caught up in a silent debate with Wilbur until the oldest won out and Tommy finally followed suit, tucking his bag in beside his brother's own.

Technoblade frowned to himself, not entirely sure what that was all about. It seemed that Tommy would listen to Wilbur at least, which might come in handy if the kid started acting out. Techno filed that particular information away for later, just in case.

The ride home was filled with painful small talk, courtesy of Phil and Wilbur who seemed to be the only ones making any effort.

Techno was nothing if not stubborn and was prepared to let his dad know about his dissatisfaction with the current situation by hitting him with the silent treatment.

Tommy, though, seemed oddly quiet, which felt like a stark contrast to the boisterous kid who'd broken down in hysterics at the thought of being separated from his brother. Phil would fire questions in his direction every now and then but the boy would just mumble vague answers and deflect the question to Wilbur.

The kid shrank in on himself, practically radiating nervous energy, his leg bouncing up and down and eyes darting around wildly as if he were cornered and scared. The long drive clearly wasn't doing him any favours, unfortunately Phil lived far out enough that there wasn't much around where they could stop off and stretch their legs.

When they pulled up in the driveway, Techno felt exhausted. He wanted nothing more than to head to bed and forget about the two strangers he now had to live with. Phil had already announced that they were here and had left the car to open the front door.

Techno reached for his seatbelt then stopped, hearing hushed voices behind him, he subtly glanced in the mirror again. Wilbur was leaning close to Tommy whispering something hurriedly in his ear. The older kid smiled and gave his hand a gentle squeeze before straightening up and catching Techno watching them in the mirror.

They locked eyes for a moment, then Techno opened the door and stepped into the chilly autumn air.

He joined Phil on the doorstep who seemed to be fiddling with his keys.

"Ah, Techno! Can you help Wilbur and Tommy bring their stuff in?"

"C'mon, I'm sure they can manage two bags between them."

"Please, Techno? They haven't got much."

With a dramatic sigh, Techno spun around, trudging back to the car. Wilbur and Tommy had managed to get out and were lingering nearby. Techno ignored them and made his way straight to the rear of Phil's car. He'd barely managed to pop open the boot when Tommy barged past him, shoving him out the way as he struggled hefting Wilbur's case onto the ground.

"Are you kiddin' me?"

"What?"

"You're really just gonna push right past me?"

"You shouldn't have been in my way." Tommy said and narrowed his eyes. Techno grit his teeth and tried to resist the urge to punt the brat right into the fucking sun there and then.

Wilbur quickly rounded the car, grabbing Tommy first by the back of his shirt and pulling him away, then reaching for the case with his free hand.

"Sorry! I asked him to grab the bags – that one's on me."

Techno stared at him for a moment then turned away, retrieving Tommy's bag and passing it to Wil before leading them to the door where Phil was waiting.

"What was that all about?" He asked quietly as Technoblade stepped inside.

"Nothin'."

Wilbur and Tommy took an extra few seconds to drag Wilbur's case through the doorway before setting it down in the hall.

The kids seemed to huddle together almost instinctively as they looked around.

Phil's house was rustic, seemingly a cross between a modestly-sized family home and winter cabin. Truth be told, it was way too much space for just two people but now with the addition of Tommy and Wilbur, Techno realised that it felt a lot smaller than usual.

Tommy looked around quickly as if he had to commit the whole layout to memory, while Wilbur's eyes seemed to fall on every little detail.

Techno was surprised to feel just a bit vulnerable. There were pictures of him on the wall with Phil through the years, some of them when he was a lot younger and then more recent ones taken last summer.

Wilbur seemed to notice them all and the intrusive way he seemed to be judging them was definitely not lost on Techno. He felt a painful tugging in his chest - they were his memories with Phil and these strangers had absolutely no right to them.

"Okay, so this is the hallway – obviously – you can pop your coats and shoes here when you come in."

Phil smiled widely, just a bit too chipper as he took them from room to room. Techno watched them both cautiously, though Wilbur was the only one who seemed to realise, keeping his face cautiously neutral the whole time.

"And the garage is through there but we never use it." Phil continued his tour, coming full circle and stopping at the base of the staircase. "The upstairs is just bedrooms and a bathroom," he continued up the stairs with Tommy behind him and Wilbur following closely. The older kid threw guarded glances over his shoulder at Techno, as if he expected some kind of attack but otherwise didn't react.

"That one's mine and Techno is over there," Phil gestured to two rooms on one side of the hallway. "The bathroom is here and these two are yours."

Phil finished by opening the two doors on the opposite side of the hall.

The rooms were fully furnished, though slightly bare. Phil had seemed to err on the side of caution when it came to decoration, he didn't want to risk using a colour Tommy might not like so gave it a new coat of white paint Techno insisted it didn't need but helped with regardless.

Wilbur's room was very similar, almost identical, though marginally smaller. It was the guest room and Techno had only seen it occupied twice, by old friends of Phil who made the long drive north to visit. They never stayed long but seemed friendly enough, though Techno had spent most of the time hiding in his room. Back then, all adults who weren't Phil seemed terrifying and he'd rather keep his distance.

"What do you think?"

"They're great," Wilbur looked back, first at Techno, then to Phil. "Thank you."

Phil smiled, seemingly relived. "That's no problem, I'll let you both get settled in and get started on lunch. Did you eat anything before you left?"

"We-" Wilbur looked at Tommy who blinked up at him owlishly. "No, sorry, we didn't."

"That's okay, I'll make enough for all of us then. I'll give you guys a shout when it's done."

"Thanks."

Phil smiled and headed back downstairs, leaving Techno, Tommy and Wilbur on the landing.

Techno felt the tension immediately. It was clear that Tommy didn't like him and the feeling was mutual, though he wasn't too sure where he stood with Wilbur. The guy was a stranger living in his house and came as a package deal with his kid brother but he didn't look constantly on the verge of attacking him like Tommy. Wilbur was friendly, he seemed polite and didn't look like he would cause Phil any trouble. Techno decided he hated him.

"What are you looking at, bitch?" Tommy was snarling at him already.

"God- fuck, Tommy- *stop* it," Wilbur pushed Tommy back and into his room, tossing his bag in after him. "Sorry about that, it's long car rides, he gets tired." Wilbur smiled bashfully and slipped into the room behind Tommy. Techno heard the click of the lock followed by hushed voices, whispered shouting that seemed to go back and forth between them.

As much as Techno wanted to press his ear to the door and listen he forced himself to move away and padded across the hall to his own room. It wasn't until the door closed behind him that he felt like he could finally breathe again.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Thank you so much to everyone who's read/left kudos/commented so far!

It means the world to know that there's people out there enjoying this!

Techno curled up on top of his bed, still feeling slightly nauseous from the whole ordeal with Wilbur and Tommy, that and he definitely wasn't in the mood to see Phil just yet.

He was pretty sure his dad had picked up on the fact that he was not too happy with him but choosing to let Techno come round. He likely figured it was growing pains and that in a few hours he'd get over it. After all, arguments between Techno and Phil were never serious and always short-lived but something about this felt different and hurt in a way which Techno tried very hard to ignore.

Usually Techno never minded staying in his room, he liked socialising on his own terms and there had never been a problem with that since staying with Phil but the tension was corrosive. It ate away at him and no matter how hard he tried, he could feel it ever-present and boring into his skin.

Nothing could distract him. When playing games, he found his hands twitching as they flew across the keyboard, unable to go seconds without dying. He'd tried reading but found himself lost in the words, thoughts pulling his attention elsewhere and away from the page in front of him.

The very worst part was that if he sat still and kept perfectly quiet he could hear muttering from across the hall. It had to be Tommy, Wilbur's voice wasn't loud enough to carry and as much as Techno wanted to ignore it, he couldn't help but strain his ears to pick up on words, sentences, anything that would help him figure out who the hell he would be living with for the foreseeable future.

He heard the creak of the floorboards and then a knock on his own bedroom door.

"Techno, there's some food downstairs if you feel hungry."

He didn't reply, biting down hard into the fabric of his pillow and balling his hands into tight fists as he waited for Phil to leave. Sure enough, after a few seconds, Phil made his way to Wilbur and Tommy's door to invite them as well.

Techno didn't come down for lunch. He was angry and hurt and tired and just wanted to sleep and wake up with Phil rubbing his back and calming him down from this nightmare. He

wanted to hear words of affirmation that he was enough, that Phil would never replace him, that Techno never had to feel on edge or unwelcome in his own home.

Closing his eyes, he tried to calm down, breathing slowly and deeply like Phil had taught him when he first moved in and had no idea how to deal with his panic attacks. The memories sent a sharp bolt of pain through his heart but the technique worked nonetheless and Techno's muscles relaxed until he was drifting off to sleep.

~*~

Techno woke up again when evening was beginning to set in. The sky was washed in shades of pale blue and peach as the sun dropped below the horizon.

As Techno blinked himself awake, he realised, through the lethargy that still clouded his mind, that he was incredibly hungry. Skipping lunch and breakfast had taken its toll and though he had previously planned on missing dinner too he found the uncomfortable emptiness in his stomach to be way too painful to ignore.

Without thinking too hard about it, Techno opened his door and padded out into the hallway. The grogginess left over from sleep had dampened his hatred towards the two foster kids somewhat and he didn't look twice when passing their room.

Techno could smell Phil's cooking before he saw it. If his nose was any indication, Phil had been roasting chicken legs seasoned with a blend of smoky paprika, garlic and an assortment of herbs he's likely plucked from Techno's own greenhouse in the back garden.

Phil was a busy guy and cooking didn't come naturally to him, so while he did his best, homemade meals from scratch weren't an everyday occurrence but when Phil did find time to cook it was always over the top and worth the wait.

Techno took a seat at the table, wiping the last remnants of sleep from his eyes when he heard shuffling from the landing upstairs. It felt like somebody had thrown a bucket of ice cold water over him and he finally recalled just why he was so hungry in the first place. He felt his shoulders tense as he sat there waiting.

Phil poked his head out of the kitchen doorway.

"Techno! Good to see you, I was getting worried."

"Mhmm."

"Tired?"

"Yeah. I had a nap."

"That's good, feel any better?"

"No."

Phil frowned and Techno shifted in his chair uncomfortably. Admittedly he wasn't a very social person but Phil knew him embarrassingly well and Techno was well aware of how easily he saw through him.

"Well," he began with signature optimism. "Hopefully some food should make you feel better."

"Yeah…"

Techno let the word linger as his dad smiled at him again and walked into the hallway to call for Wilbur and Tommy before disappearing into the kitchen again to finish off dinner.

Tommy came barrelling down the stairs first. He was yelling about something but Techno could pick up on the fact that he was likely *always* yelling about something. As the kid ran into the dining room he caught sight of Techno and stopped dead in his tracks. Wilbur, not far behind him, nearly slammed into the kid's back, only managing to catch himself in time and come to a rather ungraceful stop.

A tense silence settled between them. Techno didn't take his eyes off Tommy as the kid tried to stare him down, if it was a fight he wanted then Techno was more than game.

"Are you gonna sit down?"

"Are you going to mind your own business, bitch?"

Techno saw Wilbur open his mouth but beat him to it. "Well I'd say this is my business, seein' as this is my house and all."

"You know, big man, I don't actually think this is your house at all."

"Tommy…" Wilbur cautioned from behind him, placing a hand on Tommy's shoulder placatingly that went ignored.

"Well *I think* you're wrong," Techno's voice was dangerously low as he spoke. "*This* is where I've sat for the past 4 years, *those* are pictures of me," he gestured to the family collages that decorated the walls which Wilbur seemed unable to take his eyes off earlier. "And that," Techno nodded in the direction of the kitchen, "is *my* Dad, so I think you're in my house and completely unaware of the fact that you don't belong here."

Tommy stood frozen, seemingly taken aback by the outburst but still standing his ground and refusing to look away.

Just as the silence began to feel suffocating, Phil emerged from the kitchen carrying hot dinner plates. He seemed surprised to see Wilbur and Tommy down already but smiled warmly at them in a way that made Techno's stomach churn.

"It's good to see you both, I didn't hear you come down," Phil set the plates on the table and turned back to them. "You can sit where you want, I've made chicken, roast potatoes and

there's some veg on the side there too."

"Thank you." Wilbur spoke for them both, pushing Tommy down and into a seat, pointedly avoiding eye contact with Technoblade.

They didn't speak as Phil set out the other plates and retrieved a pitcher of water for the table as well as a set of glasses.

"That's Phil's seat." Techno nodded to where Wilbur was sitting opposite him.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't realise," Wilbur jumped up but Phil shook his head.

"No, no, it's fine! I'll sit beside Techno, we don't have allocated seats or anything."

Tommy shot a pointed look at Techno which only served to antagonize him further.

Techno reached for the water, filling his glass halfway and setting it down again. When he looked up Wilbur and Tommy hadn't moved. Wilbur's eyes were flitting back and forth between Techno and Phil, while Tommy had his hands clutching at his knife and fork. Techno glanced at Phil who seemed equally as confused.

"Well," Phil began awkwardly. "Dig in?"

Tommy took that as his cue to attack his food with absolutely no mercy. He didn't even bother to cut the potatoes up, just shovelling them straight into his mouth as if he were afraid they'd be taken from him at a moment's notice.

Wilbur worked with more restraint, slicing off a piece of chicken carefully. He inspected it on his fork then brought it up to his lips, hesitating for a second before taking a bite. Techno saw the way his eyes lit up before staring down at his food in slight disbelief.

The whole ordeal made him just a bit uncomfortable. Techno remembered being in his position, eating good food and wondering if Phil had actually made it for him or if it wasn't actually meant for him at all. He'd figured it would be a reward system, if he did good at school and stayed out of trouble Phil would reward him with delicious meals but even on Techno's worst days, Phil would still spoil him with his cooking. It was something Techno was used to now and didn't surprise him anymore but the disbelief and wonder on Wilbur's face sent him back to a darker time in his life he'd rather not relive.

He wanted to make some kind of comment, remind Tommy about his table manners, but the words got caught in his throat. Techno took a sip of water.

"So, how have you boys been settling in so far?" Phil was the first one to break the silence.

Wilbur swallowed around the piece of chicken in his mouth. "Good, the trees look nice outside."

As far as conversation went, it was painfully basic. Wilbur seemed to be walking on eggshells, trying to find the most inoffensive answer to Phil's question as if it were a minefield and one wrong word could cause the ground to erupt beneath his feet.

"That's good, I was a bit worried that you'd find it boring but maybe when the weather gets better Techno could show you around sometime? He's got a rope swing out there somewhere."

Wilbur visibly blanched at the thought and looked over to Techno wearily. Truth be told, going anywhere with Wilbur and Tommy seemed like Techno's own personal hell but because Wilbur seemed so uncomfortable he smiled easily and spoke in a low drawl.

"Sure, I'd love to."

It seemed to do the trick as Wilbur shivered in his seat, hands gripping his cutlery just a bit too tight.

"You've both got a few days to settle in before we get you started at school, I know it's probably not something you want to think about now but it's not as scary as it sounds."

The mention of school seemed enough to get Tommy to look up from his food for a moment to glare at Phil. It also gave Wilbur time to discreetly slide an extra leg of chicken and potato onto Tommy's plate, seemingly unnoticed. Techno made sure to lock eyes with him afterwards, just so he knew Techno had seen him, causing the kid to busy himself by reaching for his glass of water.

"I don't really see what the big deal about school is, they're only going to kick me out anyway." Tommy had cleared his plate and was talking a lot louder than necessary, Wilbur seemed to predict Tommy's spiel before it even left his lips, judging by the way he seemed to brace himself. "They always do, it's like they've got something against me."

"There's this thing, it's called behavin' - you should try it sometime, it's great for when you don't wanna get kicked out of class." Techno couldn't help it, there was something about the arrogance in Tommy's voice that really hit a nerve.

He could tell already that Tommy was a problem child, he'd been there himself and the parallels between them were frankly a bit unsettling but there was no way he'd sit there and let Tommy be more of a burden on Phil.

Phil had been good enough to take them in, like he'd done for Techno in the past and while Techno had never taken Phil for granted, Tommy seemed quite happy to exploit the man's kindness and caring nature, which was where Techno drew the line.

"What the fuck did you say to me?"

"I said you're causin' problems on purpose. Don't act like a child in class and they won't treat you like one."

"Techno," Phil said in warning.

"What? I'm right."

"That's not-"

"Phil, look at him," Techno pointed a finger at Tommy. "The kid throws tantrums when he doesn't get what he wants. You saw the look on that woman's face, she couldn't wait to get rid of him! She knew he was a brat who's so desperate for attention he acts out and causes trouble for everyone unfortunate enough to have to deal with him. Why don't we just skip the bit where he makes our lives a living hell and send him back already? It's clear that he's not gonna change so why are we even bothering?"

"Techno!" Phil was staring down at him, eyes blown wide in shock. "That's enough."

Tommy stood up abruptly and ran for the door, his feet thundering up the stairs.

"C'mon Phil, I'm just sayin' what we're both thinking."

"Techno, no. That's not-"

Wilbur's chair scrapped against the flooring as he stood up.

"I-" He locked eyes with Techno, demeanour suddenly cold and Techno fought the urge to look away. After a moment, Wilbur turned his attention to Phil. "Can I clean up?"

"No, Wil I've got it, okay?" Phil sighed, looking exhausted. "Why don't you check on Tommy, make sure he's alright?"

Wilbur nodded stiffly and then made for the doorway.

Phil waited until Wilbur was definitely upstairs and out of earshot before he spoke. "Techno that was-" he broke off shaking his head. "Why would you say that? Tommy's clearly struggling already and the last thing he needs right now is to be upset in his own home." Techno tensed at the mention of home and the thought of Tommy being anything but temporary was dizzying. "You heard what his care worker said, what if he tries to run?"

"Then let him. If he doesn't wanna be here, he should just leave."

"He's just a kid."

"I knew better when I was his age."

"You haven't had the same experiences, you have no idea what it's like for him."

"I have no idea? Are you kiddin' me? Phil, in case you forgot, I grew up in the same system, I know it better than anybody. Not every messed-up kid you pick up is gonna buy into your saviour complex - not every kid is me."

Phil didn't say anything. He just stood there as if frozen in time, eyes glassy and breath caught in his throat and Techno wondered if he really said what he thought he'd said.

Then, upon realising he had, Techno hurried to the door, not looking back – he didn't want to see Phil's face.

He made a beeline for his bedroom, ignoring the poorly supressed sobs followed by soothing whispers coming from behind Tommy's door.

As soon as he was in the safety of his own room, Techno closed his door with a slam. He made straight for his bed, changing into his pyjamas and burrowing deep under the covers. It wasn't late but Techno didn't want to deal with anything else today, more than happy to lay in the dark and pretend to be asleep.

Sometime later he heard Phil's careful footsteps up the stairs and something in his chest lurched painfully. He heard a knock on Tommy's door, followed by quiet conversation. Techno couldn't hear much aside from Wilbur murmuring something quietly as Phil spoke gently to him.

The exchange couldn't have lasted more than a few minutes, then the door clicked shut again and Techno listened to the sound of Phil's feet as they came to a stop outside his room. There was a hesitant knock and after the silence that followed, Phil cracked open the door slightly.

"Techno?" He called quietly.

Techno squeezed his eyes shut, hoping his breathing was even enough for Phil to think he was asleep.

Whether Techno's acting was convincing or not, Phil chose not to press him, quietly shutting the door and leaving him be.

Technoblade breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed back into his pillows, the exhaustion of the day finally catching up to him and dragging him into a fitful sleep.

~*~

Techno woke up hours before his alarm. The sky was still mostly dark and he felt as if he had barely slept at all.

While he was tempted to lay in bed even longer, he found himself feeling significantly worse. Without anything to do he was just left alone with his thoughts.

After tossing and turning for several minutes, he decided to get up early. As expected, the rest of the house was quiet and though Techno didn't need to sneak around he found himself doing so anyway.

With as little noise as possible, he showered and got dressed before heading downstairs. He shrugged on a coat and tried to get some work done in the garden while the sun was rising and it was still quiet out, though in truth there really wasn't much to do. After growing bored of standing outside wasting time, he retreated back to the living room to watch TV quietly but found himself unable to focus for more than a few seconds.

Eventually, Techno decided to abandon all hope and get himself an early breakfast. He padded into the kitchen, opening the cupboard and reaching for his box of cereal only to find an empty space.

Phil's Weetabix was still there but the Rice Krispies were missing. Techno knew there had been more than half the box left, so it wasn't likely that they had been finished off and thrown away in the span of a day.

He thought of Tommy and Wilbur sneaking down in the middle of the night, ransacking the house and taking small things they suspected Techno and Phil wouldn't notice.

Fending off the sudden surge of anger, Techno had to force himself not to slam the cupboard door shut and wake up the others.

He dashed into the hallway, feeling for his coat and retrieving his wallet from one pockets. He pulled out a £10 note before putting the wallet back so he wouldn't forget it, then returned to the kitchen.

He folded the note at an awkward angle, running his thumb along the fold so that it was visible when he unfolded it. Then he repeated the process, creasing an 'x' into the note. Then, Techno slipped it under the fruit bowl sitting on the kitchen counter, leaving half of it jutting out innocently.

Satisfied with his work Techno turned his attention back to breakfast and what he could eat instead of his usual. He opted for toast instead, spreading a generous amount of jam on top and cutting it up into squares before stacking them onto a plate.

As he turned around, he noticed Phil standing in the doorway and jumped.

"Morning." Phil said, his voice scratchy and hoarse. He shuffled into the kitchen and didn't smile when he spoke.

Techno winced, even just by looking at him, he could see that the man had barely slept either. His blonde hair was a mess as it fell to his shoulders and the grey bags beneath his eyes looked worse than Techno had ever remembered them being.

"Mornin'."

Though he had initially wanted to bring up the cereal incident, he didn't feel like he could. He didn't know what to say, instead just kept his head down as he crunched loudly to fill the silence between them.

It wasn't until Phil had sat down with a steaming cup of coffee that he spoke again.

"You need to apologise to Tommy and Wilbur."

Technoblade turned to him, protest on his lips that died as soon as they locked eyes. Instead, he signed and hung his head.

"Okay."

Phil smiled weakly at him. "Good."

Techno finished the last of his toast, sitting awkwardly as Phil sipped at the rest of his coffee in silence. When Phil finished he stood, mug in one hand and reaching for Techno's empty plate with the other.

"Phil!" Without warning Techno's head shot up, looking him directly in the eye. He swallowed and muttered nervously. "I- I'm sorry."

Phil smiled, setting the mug and plate down and he moved to ruffle Techno's hair. "I know but you've gotta tell Tommy and Wilbur too."

"I know that, I- I'm just- I'm sorry… for what I said to you." Techno finished quietly, looking down at the floor, trying to fight the burning of unshed tears that blurred his vision.

"Oh, Techno," Phil stepped towards him, pulling his son closer. Techno latched onto him immediately, hands clutching at his dad's shirt and he let himself be held. "It's okay."

Techno shook his head stubbornly. "No, it's wrong and I didn't mean it and-"

He broke off and Phil shushed him gently, rubbing circles into his back as he very slowly began to calm down.

Reluctantly, Techno released his grip on Phil's shirt, sinking back into his chair feeling exhausted even as the day was just beginning. Phil seemed to notice, being especially attentive as he drove Techno to school, making sure to keep conversation light and slipping in dumb jokes which never failed to get Techno to smile. It felt like old times and Techno was disappointed when he finally had to get out and leave him alone with the two foster kids.

In an attempt to lift him mood somewhat Phil promised to pick him up and save him the hassle of having to get the bus back. The bus stop was a 10 minute walk from Phil's house, which during the summer was rather enjoyable but not so much when the weather was getting colder and it seemed to rain every few hours.

Phil had told him that Wilbur and Tommy would be staying home initially so they could settle in and finish getting registered to the school. Techno was well-aware that whatever kid Phil took in would be going to the same school as him, he's just not realised how hard that would be when the kids were Tommy and Wilbur. Fortunately Tommy would be starting out in Year 7 or 8 so likely wouldn't be around him too much but Wilbur would likely be in Year 11 alongside him. Techno just hoped they wouldn't end up in the same classes.

If he were younger he'd probably make more of a fuss about Wilbur and Tommy getting to stay home but truth be told he really didn't want to be there. The two of them were annoying enough but Phil would likely have to handle another mountain of paperwork and a house inspection since he'd taken Wilbur in too, not to mention the copious amount of phone calls that followed up from disinterested social workers checking that the kids were settling in okay.

School wasn't too bad. Not that Techno found it especially fun per say but he liked learning and he was good at school. He was a high achiever and prided himself on that fact. It didn't hurt that Phil was always so proud of him too, which definitely served as motivation to apply himself, to do better, which helped with GCSE mocks just round the corner. Over the summer, Phil had helped him draw up flashcards and would quiz him when they had a free moment.

Sure enough, Phil was there waiting in the car park as soon as school let out, though he seemed a lot more stressed than he had done in the morning. He looked distinctly distracted but Techno opted not to mention it.

When they finally got home the house seemed oddly quiet. Phil grabbed the landline, mentioning that he still had a few calls to make and disappearing upstairs. Wilbur and Tommy seemed quiet too, wherever they were hiding, which Techno found more unnerving than anything else.

Inconspicuously, as if he were being watched, Techno made his way over to the kitchen, swiping a tangerine from the fruit bowl and stopping in front of the counter. He looked at the white ceramic bowl for a moment, then checked over his shoulder, confirming that he was alone and finally lifted it up. The £10 note was gone.

~*~

Techno missed dinner, telling Phil that he just wasn't hungry and opting to get a head start on his homework instead. It was only a half lie, he really did need to get his work done but after an underwhelming school lunch, Techno found himself craving dinner.

"Techno?" Phil rasped at his door.

"Come in," Techno slid his headphones off so they rested around his neck and swivelled around on his chair to face the doorway.

"I've put some leftovers in the fridge when you fancy them. Wilbur and Tommy know they're yours."

"Okay, I'll grab it later."

Phil looked at him and Techno knew he wasn't at all convinced by his claims of not being hungry but seemed appeased at the mention of Techno getting to it later.

Technoblade managed to hold out until 1:00am until he finally caved and ventured downstairs. He was pretty sure it was late enough for his foster siblings to be in bed as well as Phil who had work in the morning. Still, he tried to keep quiet as he walked, not wanting to wake anyone up as he passed by their rooms.

Upon reaching the kitchen, Techno stilled. Very faintly, in the far corner of the room, there was something moving in the darkness.

He took a step closer and heard a quiet gasp, it was almost inaudible and Techno was sure he would have missed it had he not been straining his ears to pick up any sound he could. Then it was still, easily blending into the shadows and Techno found himself wondering if he'd actually seen something moving at all or if he was just sleep deprived.

He edged closer using one hand to fumble for the handle of the fridge and pulled it open in one fluid motion.

White light spilled out onto the kitchen floor, causing Techno to squint for a moment as his eyes adjusted. Then when he blinked them open again, he noticed Tommy pressed into the corner of the kitchen, crouched low as to hide behind the counter with a hand clamped firmly over his mouth.

They locked eyes and for a second the kid looked at him with pure unadulterated terror and Techno thought he was about to scream but as soon as the fear was there it was gone again, replaced with a look of challenge.

Technoblade huffed, straightening up and matching Tommy's glare. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question." Tommy shifted from foot to foot but answered with his signature hostility.

Techno scoffed. "I live here."

Tommy answered evenly with a self-assuredness Techno knew had to be verging on arrogance. "So do I."

"Hmm," Techno shrugged nonchalantly. "Not for much longer if I have any say in the matter."

He didn't miss the way Tommy grit his teeth. "Well it's a good thing you don't."

"You sound awfully sure of yourself."

"I am." Tommy's grin was feral. "You know, I quite like it here, I think I might stay for a while."

"Yeah?" Techno folded his arms, the image of disinterest. "That's a shame. I don't particularly want you here"

"Well, Phil likes me so I don't think I'm going anywhere."

"Phil likes everyone, you aren't special."

"From the sound of it he isn't in much of a rush to kick me out."

"Maybe he'd be more inclined if he found out you were stealin'?"

The silence that followed was glorious as Tommy stared at him, speechless. Techno recognised it as his own victory, unable to keep the smile off his face.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tommy answered shakily, bravado lost and confidence in shambles.

"I think you do."

"You're wrong."

"Am I?" Techno asked, not even bothering to hide the teasing lilt to his voice.

"Yeah."

"Maybe I am." Techno shrugged, feigning disinterest, though he kept a careful eye on Tommy's face. "I don't know it was you; could've been Wilbur."

Tommy's eyes shone, his chest rising as he inhaled sharply, fists clenched at his sides. He swallowed loudly before he spoke, voice coming out small and weak.

"No."

"I don't care either way, it's all the same to me as long as I've gone one less of you to deal with."

"Phil won't believe you."

"Which one of us is his son?"

"*Adopted* son," Tommy spat. "You're not even really his."

Techno had heard it all already, back at school before he'd started standing up for himself. "Yeah, adopted son. He could have had any kid that came his way and he *chose* me. He wasn't forced into this, he *wanted* to keep me." He paused, small smile pulling at the corner of his lips as he regarded Tommy. "It's a shame I can't say the same for you."

The kid huffed turning away. "I don't need a family, they're overrated."

Tommy's words hit him like a punch to the gut but he recovered quickly. "You've got Wilbur. If he's not your family then what is he?"

"That's- That's none of your business."

"Maybe," Techno nodded in agreement. "But it's interesting, isn't it? He's what, like, 16? Bit strange he hasn't found a family yet, maybe it isn't a problem with him, maybe it's the fact that he can't go anywhere without you messin' things up for him."

He knew he'd hit a nerve when a look of complete and utter devastation washed over Tommy's face, followed by realisation. He wasn't sure if the kid was going to lash out or cry.

"Fuck you."

Tommy lunged at him, hand curled into a fist and hurled directly at Techno's nose. He swiftly stepped out of the way and caught hold of the kid's wrist.

Techno rolled his eyes at the way Tommy writhed to get free. "Stop that."

"Let me go!" Tommy jerked back, trying to wrench himself out of Techno's grasp.

"You literally swung at me!" Techno matched Tommy's volume, as loud as he dared to be at 1am, his tone laced with incredulousness as he spoke.

"Let me go." Tommy seemed to cower away, his voice pleading as he recoiled as much as he could while Techno still had hold of him.

Techno looked down at him, seeing a genuine fear in Tommy's eyes that disturbed him more than he'd like to admit. Without saying a word, he loosened his grip and as soon as Tommy saw the opportunity, he pulled his hand away, clutching it to his chest.

The kid's eyes were blown wide as saucers and he stared up at Techno as if watching for any sudden moves. It left Techno with a sick feeling in his stomach, something acidic and vile that he felt in the back of this throat. He'd managed to take Tommy down a peg, well, arguably more than that but he wasn't about to consider semantics. Still, he didn't feel happy about it, in fact he felt a lot worse than when he had previously.

He glanced at the open fridge, suddenly not feeling all that hungry.

With a sigh, Techno stepped to one side, giving Tommy a clear pathway to the kitchen door.

"Keep the money, you'll need it when you can't leech off my dad anymore."

Tommy didn't say anything, just nodding curtly before darting out of the kitchen, almost silent as he made his getaway.

Techno stood motionless for a full minute before he moved again, stiffly grabbing his plate out of the fridge and peeling off the cellophane, balling it up and throwing it into the nearby bin.

It was Phil's own recipe for casserole, which Techno knew to be delicious, but after the exchange with Tommy it didn't look all that appealing. Still, he dutifully warmed it in the microwave and shovelled forkful after forkful into his mouth, knowing that Phil would definitely bring it up if he found out Techno had missed out on dinner altogether.

After clearing his plate, Techno loaded it into the dishwasher and made his way back upstairs, managing to feel both exhausted and wide awake at the same time. He didn't manage to go longer than a few minutes before Tommy invaded his thoughts, panic-stricken and shaking in his hold.

Tommy had attacked him first, he hadn't hurt the kid – not really – he was only protecting himself but guilt sunk it's claws in deep and refused to let go. Techno resigned himself to another sleepless night as he made his way up the stairs.

As he reached the top, he heard a noise from Wilbur's room. The light was still on and bleeding out onto the landing from where the door was cracked open slightly.

Against his better judgement, Techno made his way closer, trying to keep as quiet as possible. He wasn't sure what he was hoping for, maybe Tommy laughing or joking – anything to convince himself that he was making a bigger deal out of the kitchen situation than he should have been.

Lingering nervously outside Wilbur's room, he peeked inside.

To his surprise Wilbur was on his own, black suitcase open and pushed to the far side of the room, with an assortment of blankets and old pillow cases spilling out in disarray. Wilbur was sat on the floor, leaning back against the bedframe with a honey-coloured guitar tucked under one arm and resting over his knees.

He was strumming quietly, fingers ghosting over the strings playing only the faintest of noises but still forming a melody of sorts. Wilbur was smiling too, gently and honestly, clearly in his element despite the restraint in his fingers.

The scene was so genuine and tender, Techno felt like he was intruding on something deeply private. He wanted to walk away, to edge back slowly before he was spotted but there was something in the music that kept him rooted in place.

"You don't have to lurk outside, you know?"

Techno felt his heart stop, breath caught in his throat and flushing at having been caught.

"We've been over this you can just come-"

Wilbur finally looked up from his guitar strings and towards the door. He locked eyes with Technoblade and immediately stilled. The smile fell from his lips and his fingers twitched, curling possessively over his instrument.

 "Please, please don't-" He swallowed loudly, not breaking eye contact with Techno even once. "I'll stop, okay? I promise, I'll do whatever you want just please don't take it. I'll never play again, I- I'm so sorry if I woke you up, I didn't mean to, I was trying to be quiet and you don't have to worry about me doing it again, really."

Techno blinked at him, taken aback by the kid's outburst. Wilbur had seemed so resolute and to see him falling apart just like Tommy had was jarring to say the least.

Wilbur's lip trembled and he bit it worriedly, clearly disturbed by Techno's silence.

"Please, I swear, I'll do anything, just don't tell Phil."

"Phil?"

Clearly, that wasn't the right thing to say as Wilbur whimpered quietly, recoiling and hugging his guitar tighter.

"Please, let me make it up to you. What do you want?"

"Nothin'."

Wilbur clearly didn't believe him, eyes hard and resigned like he had been here before, like he knew exactly how it was going to go. Techno wished he had the same knowledge.

"Is it money? I can pay you if you want! Or drugs, I can- if you want I'll get them-"

"You've got drugs?"

"No but I can if that's what you want, I swear, all I need is time and I promise you-"

"Wait, no, I'm not into that sort of thing."

"Come *on*, Technoblade. Don't make me guess."

"I don't want anythin'."

"Everybody wants something, please just let me do this, I have to do this."

"Oh my God," Techno rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "What is I *want* is for you to-"

He stopped, catching himself before it was too late - before he told Wilbur to take his brother and fuck off out of his life. He tried to convince himself there's no way he'd actually do it, but Wilbur was looking up at him intently, hanging off every word with a seriousness that made his blood run cold.

Techno cleared this throat. "I'm going to bed, it's late - you should too."

He then turned and walked away before he could see Wilbur's face, grateful when he finally reached his room, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Chapter 3

Thank you so much to everyone still sticking with this!

I seriously appreciate everyone who's taken the time to read/leave kudos and comments, thank you all again and hope you enjoy!

It was a miserable day when Tommy and Wilbur were set to start school.

The sky was overcast, with the threat of rain hanging overhead and washing the world in a dismal grey.

Wilbur schooled his face into as neural an expression as he could muster, he had Phil fooled but Techno wasn't so easily convinced. The kid was rocking onto the balls of his feet and tapping against the side of his leg, seemingly radiating with nervous energy.

Tommy was more irritable than usual. He frantically ran about the house trying to find the school supplies Phil had left in their rooms a few days after they'd moved in. When the threat of being late on their first day looked to be a real possibility, Wilbur joined in, packing Tommy's bag for him and shoving him out the door.

The ride to school was painfully quiet, even more so than the initial drive back from the group home.

Wilbur looked too tired to keep up the façade of faux positivity while Tommy muttered constantly about how the education system had screwed him over in the past.

Techno opted to ignore them both, resting his head against the frigid window and letting his eyes close. He hadn't been sleeping well ever since Wilbur and Tommy had moved in, between Tommy's petty theft and Wilbur's frantic bargaining, sleep became a blessing he was denied. Techno lay awake at night, tossing and turning under the covers, seeing his foster brothers' terrified faces every time he closed his eyes.

"-And I'll get lost no doubt because of how they design the bloody things. You ever look at a school? They just chuck corridors in the stupidest of places, doesn't matter if it makes sense or if it's easy to get to – in fact, the harder the better – they don't even *care* they just do it."

Tommy was ranting in the back seat, a constant stream of babble Techno was slowly growing more familiar with. The kid just didn't stop talking; ever and though grating, Techno was much too tired to respond.

"*Oh* and getting to a different room between periods is a nightmare. They always schedule one lesson at one end of the building and then another one right at the *other* end. Why? To watch us run. They think it's *funny*! This is why schools are fucked, the people who design them are sick bastards."

Phil laughed, glancing up in the rear view mirror at Tommy. "It's not too bad. The school's not *that* big, besides Techno can show you around, can't you?"

"Hmm."

"I won't be able to pick you up but there should be enough money left over from lunch for the bus. Techno can show you which one to get on that'll take you home after school."

Techno cracked open an eye. "Can't, I've got fencing later on."

"It's only for an hour, Wilbur and Tommy can hang around for a bit. What do you think guys, that okay with you?"

Wilbur nodded mutely and Tommy grumbled but bobbed his head in response. It wasn't like they had much of a choice unless they wanted to risk it and guess at which bus would get them back home and with the weather promising rain, it wouldn't be the smartest decision.

When they got to school, as Techno expected, Wilbur and Tommy stuck together, following him as he made his way down the corridor. It almost seemed too much to ask, for Tommy to go off and make friends his own age, he barely seemed to care about anyone other than his brother and while Techno was sure they both despised him, they didn't seem too eager to leave him alone any time soon either. Sensing that the only way to get rid of them, aside from just telling them both to fuck off, would be to actually get them to the office, Techno decided to go there first. There, they would get the rundown on what the school was like and where their classes would be – at least that's how it'd worked when Techno had first started.

Running on autopilot, he navigated the hallways easily, watching the way other students seemed to give him a wide berth and realising that the irritation on his face must have been more noticeable than he'd thought.

He stopped outside reception, Tommy colliding with his back, clearly not paying much attention to where he was going. Wilbur steadied him with a hand on his shoulder.

"This is the office. Just say you're new and they'll give you your timetables and stuff."

"Thanks," Wilbur's voice was somewhat drowned out by the incessant chatter that seemed to bounce off the walls and echo around them. "How do we know where to go?"

"You follow the signs, it's not hard."

"Right."

They just stood staring at each other, nobody really knowing how to break the awkward silence.

A few students from across the hallway seemed to notice Technoblade chatting to two new students, glancing over and talking in hushed tones amongst themselves. Techno shuddered, he'd never really liked being the centre of attention, it always made him paranoid and jumpy, like people were conspiring against him, even though he knew that it was likely just gossip.

Finally, Wilbur looked away and knocked on the door. Techno hung around until Wilbur and Tommy were allowed inside before taking his leave, heading to class and trying to clear his mind of anything even remotely related to the kids.

Unfortunately, that was easier said than done and even hours later, while sitting down to eat lunch, Techno couldn't stop his thoughts from wandering to them both.

"What's wrong?"

Techno looked up to see Ranboo approaching his table. He took a seat opposite him, setting his lunch down on the table.

Despite being a year younger, Ranboo was tall, taller than Wilbur even and could easily pass as older than his actual age. Techno didn't care, while he had friends, nobody really stuck around with him the same way Ranboo did.

While he knew he'd be welcome sitting with any of his friends, Ranboo was the only one who actively sought him out and would chat with him even when he knew he was being particularly unpleasant to be around.

The kid was never deterred and it had freaked him out to no end back when it'd first started happening. Initially, Ranboo would just approach him in the corridor every now and then, just stopping to chat, which progressed to sitting at his table in the lunch hall and then full-blown friendship which Techno still vehemently denied even if he cherished the kid more than he'd ever admit.

When he was a few years younger and still regularly getting into fights, Ranboo would stick around afterwards and help him to the nurses office despite Techno's protests and vague threats.

After one particularly brutal encounter behind the gym, Techno had landed hard onto the concrete, he took blow after blow and still managed to struggle to his feet and fend the other kid off but the damage had been done. Techno's keychain, a silver chain with a delicate golden crown hanging from the end – a gift from Phil when Techno had first moved in and one of the first gifts he'd ever gotten – had been smashed when he went down. The metal was warped and out of place and shattered completely in other areas.

He'd said it was no big deal but sulked long afterwards, never truly getting over it until a few weeks later when Ranboo had handed him a gift. It was a keychain with a grey crown dangling from it. It clearly wasn't silver, the colouring too dark, seemingly a stone Techno had never even seen before and it glistened a pearlescent purple when he held it to the light.

He'd choked up, not even able to thank Ranboo properly but it didn't seem to matter. If Ranboo's knowing grin was any indication, it seemed like Techno's face had said it all.

It was a little scary how Ranboo could always read him like an open book, just like Philza, and while it was something he'd long since accepted, it was still slightly disconcerting when Ranboo caught on instantly as to how he was feeling.

"Nothin'."

"You look pretty rough."

Techno was quiet for a moment, chewing on his chicken warp and trying to look anywhere but his friend's eyes. It didn't last for long and after a few seconds of silence he cracked.

"My dad took in two new foster kids."

"Oh," Ranboo seemed genuinely surprised. "How's, uh, how's that working out for you?"

"Not great."

"Ah… you wanna talk about it?"

"Nah."

He did. He really, really did but admitting it was almost as embarrassing as the situation itself so he shook his head and sipped at his water.

Ranboo saw through his façade easily, seemingly mulling over his words for a moment before speaking.

"Where are they now?"

"Wilbur's in my year, he's probably taken geography because he wasn't with me for history and I have no idea where Tommy is. He's gotta be in Year 7 or 8."

"Hmm, they aren't the same age then."

"No, they aren't even related."

"But I thought-"

"I know, we were only meant to be having Tommy but then he kicked off and we ended up with Wilbur too. "

Ranboo opened his mouth then shut it quickly. Techno would very rarely open up and Ranboo knew it wasn't easy for him. He wouldn't look him in the eyes and spoke with an air of indifference even though Ranboo could tell he was anything but.

"Maybe they won't be that bad?" Ranboo said eventually.

Techno laughed humourlessly. "Try living with them."

"What'd they do?"

"Nothin' really, I guess, but I know Tommy's been stealing." He hesitated for a second before continuing. "They seem to hate me but they also look terrified every time I talk to them, I can't just have a normal conversation without something going wrong."

"Maybe it just takes them a while to get used to talking to people." Ranboo smiled knowingly at him. "You were the same."

Techno glared at him and Ranboo laughed. Usually it was enough to get people to back off and leave him alone but Ranboo was never so easily deterred.

Finally, techno gave up and sighed, slouching over in his seat and biting off and chewing a chunk of his wrap.

"I don't know, it feels like I'm a stranger in my own home, like I've just got used to Phil and stuff and now I'm back at square one and have to relearn the rules all over again. It doesn't help that Phil seems to like them."

"So they're gonna be here for a while, huh?"

"I don't know. Tommy said that Phil wasn't planning on getting rid of them any time soon so yeah, probably." Techno bit his lip, glanced around nervously as if Tommy and Wilbur would suddenly be standing there but nobody even seemed to be looking in his direction. "I got mad and yelled at Tommy at dinner and it really upset Phil. I don't think he's ever been that angry with me. It just feels like he's taking their side."

"Yeah but he's probably just worried, I mean, the kids are new so he's trying to make them feel welcome and stuff."

Techno shook his head, playing with the collar of his shirt with his free hand, tugging at it nervously.

"While I was at school, they got to stay home for the first few days, adjusting and whatever, but when I got back it was like Phil was too busy for me and the kids had warmed up to him and I just felt like I missed out on something."

Ranboo stilled as he was about to take a bite of his sandwich and looked at Techno with wide eyes.

"Wait, how long have you had these guys?"

"Uh, like 3 or 4 days now?"

"And you didn't tell me?" Ranboo spluttered loudly. It wasn't quite a yell, Ranboo never outright yelled but it was more than a little obvious that he was pissed off.

Techno shrugged, looking slightly guilty. "It never came up."

"Were you even *planning* on telling me?"

"I was!" Techno didn't even believe his own lie.

"Uh-huh." Ranboo nodded distrustfully but let the matter drop. "Who are they anyway? I might have seen them around."

Techno sat up straighter and looked out across the lunch hall. It was a big room but mostly open so hiding wasn't really much of an option. If they were here, Techno would be able to spot them.

"Tommy's blonde, he's got blue eyes and curly hair – he doesn't shut up, likes to yell absolutely everything. Wilbur's tall and lanky, brown hair and- oh, there he is."

Ranboo swivelled in his seat trying to follow his friend's line of sight.

"Where? I don't see him."

"By the register, that's Tommy behind him."

Ranboo's eyes shone in recognition as he nodded then turned back around to face Techno again.

"He's not that tall."

"Well, not to you."

Ranboo laughed, nodding in agreement. "I saw the brown haired guy – Wilbur?"

Techno grunted in affirmation.

"Right, Wilbur, I saw him earlier. I knew that he was new but he didn't seem very friendly. He looked terrified and pissed off, I was going to ask if he was okay but when he saw me looking at him, he just glared."

"I mean, he hasn't been that bad so far. It's Tommy you've gotta watch out for, the kid tried to punch me."

Ranboo's jaw hung open, eyes wide with disbelief. "You're kidding."

"Nah."

Ranboo studied him for a moment, and Techno writhed under the intensity of his gaze. He felt like he was being judged, like Ranboo could see right through him.

After a minute spent in silence, Ranboo spoke again, voice level and serious. "What did you do?"

"I didn't do anythin'."

"I've *literally* seen you fight, there's no way that Tommy kid would still be in one piece if you thought for a second that he was a bad guy."

Swallowing nervously, Techno picked at his wrap, unfolding it so he wouldn't have to look Ranboo in the eyes.

"I maybe might have said something, that may be considered quite mean, about his brother."

"Well that's not very nice." Ranboo replied dryly.

"To be fair he wasn't very nice to me either."

"Yeah but he looks like he's been through some shit." Ranboo looked over his shoulder again, trying to catch another glimpse of Tommy as he followed Wilbur to an empty table at the far end of the lunch hall.

"We all have, Ranboo. His sob story doesn't mean he can be a brat."

"I know but maybe give him time, yeah?" Reaching over, Ranboo plucked a piece of chicken from Techno's dissected wrap, laughing as his hand was half-heartedly swatted away. "Anyway, I'm glad you didn't beat him up."

It was a joke but Techno still felt his stomach twist painfully. "Yeah, me too."

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, save for a moment in the hallway when Techno was walking to his last class only to round a corner and nearly slam into Wilbur, who was sprinting through the slow-moving crowd of tried students all shuffling to their final period.

Wilbur had stared at him wide-eyed for a moment. He didn't say anything so Techno opted to keep quiet too. They held eye contact for a few seconds before Wilbur darted around him and disappeared into the crowd of students. Techno shrugged it off and rode out the final lesson in relative boredom.

When the last bell finally sounded, Techno made his way to the door along with the others in is class. There wasn't any sign of Tommy or Wilbur outside his classroom, not like they had a pre-arranged meeting place anyway, after all it's not like they actually *spoke* to each other.

Techno wandered outside, caught up in the flow of students eager to rush home. The wind was howling and cruelly cold as it nipped at Techno's nose and ears. He shivered, wrapping arms around himself as he scanned the crowd already filing onto the waiting buses.

Thankfully, Wilbur was ridiculously tall and his mop of brown hair could be spotted some way away. Techno waded through the crowd, getting closer and noticing the way Wilbur also seemed to be searching for him, if the way he was rocking up onto his toes and flitting his eyes back and forth over the clusters of people was any indication.

Upon seeing him, Wilbur seemed to relax, his face softening though he was clearly shivering. He was, Techno noticed, absolutely freezing. His long brown trench coat was resting on Tommy's shoulders, with the sleeves rolled up so it looked slightly less ridiculous, though that left him with just his school uniform and Techno was well aware that the blazer was much too thin to actually be any good at fending off the cold.

Wilbur didn't smile and Techno didn't either, instead, gesturing with his hand for the brothers to follow him.

"C'mon, I'm already gonna be late."

Wilbur nodded and tugged Tommy after him as he jogged to catch up. Techno lead them back into the school towards the gym where he pushed them into the sports hall so he could grab his fencing gear.

His detour had cost him a few minutes of warm-up time and when he finally entered the hall, the others he practiced with were already chatting amongst themselves.

Techno noticed Wilbur and Tommy had taken a seat on one of the benches that lined the hall along with a few other kids who came along to wait for their friends to finish practice. The brothers kept their heads down, though it was clear they were talking amongst themselves, seemingly wary of everyone else in the room.

"Techno!"

He looked up, noticing Dream smiling widely and waving him over. He nodded in greeting and made his way across the hall to meet him.

"What took you so long?"

"I'm stuck babysittin'." Techno nodded his head in the direction of Wilbur and Tommy who were pretending not to pay attention to them, Tommy a lot less subtle than he seemed to realise.

"Ah," Dream nodded his head slowly as if he understood, then turned back to him. "Are you still okay to fence tonight?"

Techno grinned. "Oh please, if you're nervous you can just tell me – you don't have to make up excuses on my account."

"You wish." Dream smiled at him in kind, tugging his mask down over his head and Techno followed suit. "I'm not going to go easy on you."

"It's not like fighting you is particularly hard anyway."

He could hear Dream laugh behind his helmet as they sprang to life.

Despite a number of students showing up every week, Dream and Techno fought each other almost exclusively. Dream was the only one able to move with enough speed and agility to parry riposte each time Techno lunged forward and Techno had a knack for keeping Dream on his toes, always moving, driving him back with attack after attack. They clashed, foils moving against each other like silver lightning with the scrape of metal on metal ringing out around the hall.

From the corner of his eye, he could see a blur of colour move. There was a tiny moment of panic before he realised it was just Dream's friend, George, sliding across the bench so he

could sit beside Wilbur and Tommy.

He looked to be striking up conversation with Wilbur who tentatively smiled back at him though it was clear he was taking time to mull over his words before speaking – just like when they had attempted their first family dinner a few days ago.

If George picked up on it, he didn't let on. Still looking content to pass the time by making idle conversation, not even paying the fight any attention – not like Tommy anyway. The kid just stared, jumping any time the metal clattered as Dream and Techno sparred but also unable to pull his eyes away.

Techno lurched as the rubber button of Dream's foil made contact with his torso, the sword bending and arching as he drove it forward.

Techno stilled, watching Dream's chest rise and fall as he straightened himself up, panting as he recovered. He brought the guard up to his chin in salute, a motion Technoblade mirrored, then dropped, reaching up to remove his mask.

"What happened?"

"Nothin'."

"If you want to win it always helps if you look at your opponent."

"Shut up."

Dream laughed, waving him off as he still fought to catch his breath. "You want to go again?"

"Mhm." Techno bobbed his head, causally glancing over his shoulder. He wasn't the kind of person who didn't know how to mind his own business but there was something inside him that *had* to know what Wilbur and George were talking about. "I need water."

"Sure, go ahead. I'll take five minutes too."

Techno made his way over to the bench where Wilbur and Tommy were sat with George, he passed them and went straight for his water bottle, sipping idly as he stood within earshot of the group on the bench. Tommy tensed as he walked past, pressing closer to Wilbur's side and eyeing him cautiously but otherwise didn't react.

"What was it about?" He heard Wilbur ask hesitantly.

"The fight?" George turned back to look at Wilbur again. "I can't remember but it was something really dumb. I think someone told Dream that Techno was accusing him of cheating on one of his papers and was gonna get him in trouble or something - which never happened by the way, but at the time we didn't know that." George laughed, rubbing the back of his neck, somewhat embarrassed. "Dream was pissed though. Me and Sapnap – that's another one of our friends, you'll see him around at some point – we literally helped him study for weeks on end so I think all of us were tired and not thinking straight."

"So Dream went to beat him up?"

"Well, no, Dream went to *talk* to him but Techno isn't always the easiest person to talk to. One thing lead to another and they got angry and well it just kind of happened."

"Oh."

"That was years ago though!" George added hastily. "They're friends now and Techno got Dream to start fencing so that's good." He paused for a moment, smiling over at Dream. "They've got each other's back in a weird sort of way, Dream doesn't let people talk shit about Techno anymore and Techno's cool with the fact that Dream attacked him that one time."

"That doesn't sound like something you just get over."

"We were all kids back then, we did loads of stupid things and it's not like Techno was helpless. The guy's insane, in fact now that I think about it, Dream probably came off worse."

Wilbur shuddered and George blinked as if suddenly realising that the colour had drained from Wilbur's face.

"I mean, he's fine, seriously! One of the nicest guys I know. He's always helped me with my English homework when I get stuck. Basically, he's okay as long as you don't piss him off."

"Right." Wilbur didn't look convinced. He scanned the hall nervously, jolting backwards into George as he noticed Techno standing a lot closer than he had realised.

"Hey, Techno!" George looked up at him and waved in greeting.

"Hullo." Techno smiled awkwardly, setting his bottle down and pulling his mask over his face.

Wearing it for too long always made him uncomfortably warm and the air grew stuffy though he persevered since it was better than flushing bright red at having been caught eavesdropping.

"You good to go?"

Dream bounded over, already smug and confident from his first victory.

"You're on."

Techno didn't let anything distract him the second time round, eyes locked on Dream as they moved back and forth. The image of Dream's teasing grin was still fresh in his mind and he pushed himself harder. There was absolutely no way he'd let Dream have the win twice in a row.

His suspicions were confirmed that his foster brothers were talking about him and while he'd rather they didn't, it wasn't like George was telling them anything private. They'd find out about his history with Dream sooner or later, the fight was something that neither one of them had been able to completely escape even years after it had happened.

Their foils met again, and though neither one of them faltered, Dream's movements were less sharp and though fast, his footwork was slightly clumsy. He was getting tired. Techno pushed again, driving Dream back, having him meet every attack quickly one after the other. Until finally he managed to land a hit.

Dream's groan of annoyance was like music to his ears but they still returned back to their starting positions, saluting once again before meeting in the middle to shake with their non-gloved hands.

Sprawled out on the floor, Dream reached out to pull his helmet off, letting it roll to one side as he threw an arm over his face.

"Don't even talk to me." He said through the wide grin on his face.

Techno laughed genuinely for the first time in a while. "If you want to defeat me, train for another 100 years."

"I hate you so much."

"Sucks to suck."

"Next time you're going down *twice*."

"Uh huh, let me know how that works out for you."

Techno looked up as George approached and nudged Dream with his foot.

"Are you done?"

"Avenge me, George."

"If you don't get up I'll just drive home without you."

"You can't drive."

"I'll figure it out."

Reluctantly Dream sat up, reaching out for George to pull him up.

"Don't look at me."

"*George*." Dream whined then turned to Techno.

"I would but you're all sweaty and that's kinda gross…"

"You're both the worst."

Dream got to his feet, smiling once more at Techno and then turning to leave, only to notice Wilbur and Tommy hovering nervously behind George.

"Oh, hey, I don't think I know you guys. I'm Dream."

Wilbur nodded curtly, quite happy to stand far enough away so that he was out of Dream's reach. Tommy was hovering behind him, though poked his head out to get a closer look at what was going on.

"I'm Wilbur and this is Tommy."

"It's nice to meet you both."

"You too."

The whole exchange was slightly awkward and though Techno could see Dream open his mouth and shut it, he ultimately chose not to say anything. Instead, he smiled and made his way towards the door, George at his side, yelling a final goodbye to Wilbur and Tommy as he went.

"Ready to go home?"

Wilbur nodded a little too enthusiastically. "Yeah, sure if you are."

Techno took longer than normal getting changed. He was always slightly early for the bus but the thought of standing in awkward silence with Tommy and Wilbur was unbearable. The fact that Wilbur didn't have a coat to fend off the biting wind was a coincidence, Techno told himself that Wilbur was not his problem – he was Phil's. When Techno did finally emerge, he walked straight outside, trusting them to follow him.

Techno's timing was perfect and they made it onto the waiting bus with no problem. It was getting darker quickly as they edged closer to winter and despite it being an hour after school had ended, there was still a small crowd of kids who had finished their after school clubs and were waiting around for a ride home.

Once onboard, Techno ushered them to the back of the bus, ignoring Tommy's loud protests and toothless threats.

"This is the bus you'll take most days. If it's not at this bus stop, don't get on – it won't take you home. On the days where this bus isn't at this specific stop, get on the one that's in its place."

"What if-" Wilbur clamped his mouth shut, as if thinking better of asking questions.

"What if what?"

"What if we get on the wrong one?" Wilbur finished quietly, looking at Techno's shoulder instead of meeting his eyes.

"Then you call Phil. I mean, you *could* get on it if you wanted to but it's like a 30 minute walk and Phil can just pick you up on his way home from work."

Wilbur blinked at him.

"You got all that?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good." With that, Techno sat a few seats away, leaving a sizable distance between them and fished a book out of his bag.

He didn't expect himself to get much reading done. Even when they were doing nothing, Wilbur and Tommy were distracting and he couldn't help but keep one eye on them.

People piled onto the bus, filling up most of the seats in front of them. A few decided to head up onto the upper deck and Techno could hear the stamping of their feet as they clambered up the stairs, shouting as they went.

He sulked, begrudging Dream for being a year older and already having his own car. He made a note to self to bother Phil about driving lessons as soon as he hit his 17th birthday.

By the looks of things the foster kids weren't too happy about the influx in people either, seemingly tense and looking around nervously. Then Wilbur froze, sitting up straighter in his seat.

There was a group of kids who had stepped on, one boy in particular seemed to grin maliciously as he spotted Wilbur and Tommy. Wilbur glared at him, lip curling back into a snarl as he pressed Tommy against the window, body acting like a makeshift shield as the guy approached.

The sight made Techno's stomach turn, adrenaline surging through him, the urge to fight or flee seizing him as he set his book down, shifting slightly in discomfort.

He was a few feet away from where Wilbur was sat, the others in his friend group trailing after him but seemingly disinterested.

Techno swore he could hear Wilbur's heart hammering in his chest, then for a second Wilbur turned his attention away from the boy and to Techno. He didn't say anything but he didn't have to.

The kid followed his line of sight, spinning around to see Techno sitting there, book at his side and arms folded, with his brown eyes narrowed dangerously behind his glasses.

To his own surprise, Techno spoke first.

"What?" It wasn't so much a question as it was a statement and despite the noise of the people around them, the word rung out loud and clear.

The boy looked at him, obviously irritated. He wasn't someone Techno knew or had seen around but the school was big and while he didn't know the boy, the boy certainly seemed to be familiar with who Technoblade was.

"We're looking for a seat, can we take the space next to you?"

Techno glanced down at Wilbur and Tommy huddled into one corner from where he sat leaning against the window at the other side of the bus. There was plenty of room between

them, likely enough to fit another 3 or 4 people comfortably but Techno recognised the question for what it really was.

It was a thinly veiled front for torment and whether Techno would sit by and let it happen or not.

He glanced at Wilbur who was now back to glaring at the kid and his followers again, standing his ground despite the way his hands shook in his lap.

"No."

There was a moment of tense silence before the boy nodded and turned around, heading up the stairs onto the second floor of the bus with the others following him.

Techno felt Wilbur's eyes on him and could have sworn he'd heard a muttered and pitifully shaky, "thank you".

Techno pretended that he hadn't heard it, head already buried in his book and jolting slightly as the bus lurched forwards and began moving.

Since Phil's house was practically isolated and on the edge of a forest it meant that Techno was usually the last one on the bus by the time it reached his stop.

Though he didn't say anything, the brothers stood up and followed Techno silently when he got up to leave. As soon as their feet hit the pavement, Techno started walking, not wanting to hang around as the sky darkened and wind howled around them. He was already cold enough already and Wilbur's lips were beginning to turn blue as he curled in on himself to conserve whatever warmth he could. Tommy didn't seem to be faring much better was he pulled Wilbur's coat around himself tighter, shivering as he put one foot in front of the other and followed Techno home.

Techno knew it usually took him about 10 minutes to get home, though with Tommy and Wilbur it took around 8 since it was painfully obvious neither of them really wanted to be hanging around each other for any longer than they had to.

By the time they got to the door, Tommy had resorted to rubbing his hands together, blowing on them to keep warm as Wilbur shook with violent tremors as his teeth chattered in his mouth.

With numb fingers, Techno pulled his keys out of his pocket, tiny grey crown jangling as he shoved the front door key into the lock and twisted. He was surprised to find the door already unlocked and wasted no more time in getting it open do he could step inside, followed quickly by Tommy and Wilbur.

"Boys?" Phil poked his head out into the hallway. "You're home!"

At the sound of Phil's voice Wilbur straightened, clasping his hands behind his back to hide the fact that they were shaking as Tommy scrambled to wrestle the coat from his shoulders and kick his battered trainers off by the door.

"How was school?"

"Shit."

"Fine." Wilbur amended, shooting a pointed look at Tommy, who in turn, rolled his eyes.

"Well the first day's always the hardest." Phil tried to smile somewhat encouragingly but it was weak, like he didn't even believe the words he was saying.

"Yeah," Wilbur paused for a moment then his eyes widened in a moment of realisation. "Oh, here, it's the change from lunch and the bus."

He nudged Tommy who dug into his pocket to pull out his leftover money as Wilbur did the same. Instead of passing it to Phil, Tommy dropped it into Wilbur's hand who then held it out to Phil.

"Ah, thanks mate."

Wilbur nodded, as Phil took it from him, shifting from foot to foot nervously and staring at the man's chest instead of meeting his eyes.

"Wilbur!" He flinched slightly at the mention of his name, seemingly fighting the urge to back up and into Tommy. "Your hands are freezing! Didn't you have a coat?"

"I-" As soon as the word left his lips he stopped, looking to Tommy then back to Phil before muttering quietly. "No…"

"You should have told me."

Wilbur nodded, his face not giving anything away but the way he seemed to hold his breath as if waiting for something was telling.

"Here," Phil plucked a thick coat off a peg by the door and held it out to Wilbur. "Try this on."

The kid looked taken aback for a second but quickly recovered and took the coat from Phil, slipping it on.

"It looks like a good fit." Phil smiled at him, which Wilbur returned though slightly shakily.

"That's my coat."

Phil sighed. "Techno, you've got plenty of coats. Let Wilbur have this one, okay? At least until we get round to going shopping."

"Whatever."

Techno turned and made his way into the kitchen. He had wanted to head straight to his room but needed a hot drink to try and warm himself up after the walk home. As he went, he could hear Phil's voice follow him down the hallway.

"Don't worry too much about him, he doesn't mind."

"I don't know, big man, it sure looks like he does."

"*Tommy*." Wilbur hissed quietly though Techno could still hear it echo off the walls.

Phil laughed. "Yeah he gets like that sometimes, just give him some time to come round. His bark's worse than his bite."

Wilbur's nervous laughter was the last thing he heard as he turned the tap on, running water drowning out any of the conversation the others were having without him. Techno filled the kettle up and set it back down on its base, flicking the switch and letting it boil.

"How's it going?"

Techno's head snapped up to find Phil smiling kindly in the kitchen doorway.

"Fine, I guess."

"You don't sound so sure about that."

Techno shrugged, turning his back on Phil and opening the cupboard before reaching for his mug.

"Here, I'll make it. You go sit down."

Techno hesitated for a second then nodded and shuffled over to sit at the breakfast bar.

"Tea or coffee?"

"Tea."

Phil nodded, already spooning heaps of sugar into Techno's cup followed by a teabag. He also set himself out a mug, dumping considerably less into his own cup.

"How was fencing?"

"Good."

"Was Dream there?"

"Yeah."

"Did you kick his ass?"

"Obviously."

Phil laughed, smiling with a tender sincerity as he reached over to ruffle Techno's hair. "That's my boy."

His smile was contagious and before he knew it, Techno felt his own lips curl into a grin he tried to hide behind his hand.

Phil finished off the tea, setting Techno's down in front of him.

"Thanks."

"Anytime." He paused as Techno stood up to rummage around the cupboard, shifting boxes and cans out of the way. "Are you hungry?"

Techno hummed in affirmation, not stopping his search.

"I went shopping today. I had a half day at work and thought it might be a good idea to stock up on food with 3 teenagers in the house."

"You *could* just have one teenager in the house, you know, in case you were considerin' making life easier for the both of us."

"Techno…" Phil sighed. "I know this hasn't been easy for you – it hasn't been easy for anyone. We're all still learning about each other and that's fine but I just want you to know that I really appreciate you helping out, even if you don't particularly want to. It just- thanks, honestly – it's a massive help."

"It's fine, I don't really mind."

"Even so, I've been spending a lot of time helping Tommy and Wilbur get settled in and I don't want you to feel left out."

"I don't feel left out."

It was a blatant lie that Phil saw right through but he played long regardless.

"Well, just in case you do, I got you something." Techno perked up, blinking at Phil in intrigue as he watched the man closely as he walked over to one of the shopping bags still sitting on the counter. He pushed it over to Techno who dove in without hesitation.

"Really?" His eyes lit up.

"Yeah, I got the right ones didn't I?"

Techno nodded, pulling out the pack of Golden Delicious apples, tearing into it and pulling one out.

He held it up, watching as the kitchen light caught on its skin, making it shine a bright yellow. He brought it to his lips.

"Woah, hold on there a second! Let me wash it first."

Techno pouted but let Phil take the fruit from him and run it under the tap.

"You went into town? They don't sell these at the store nearby."

"Not really." Phil hummed. "I drove to the big supermarket so it took me a good hour and a bit."

"Just for me?"

"Well, I got other food too but that was definitely a part of it," he laughed. "Also completely humiliated myself in the process so that was fun."

Techno sat up. "You what?"

"Turns out, they're not actually called gapples. That's just a word you made up."

Techno burst out laughing, doubling over as he rubbed at his eyes. "I would have killed to seen that."

"Yeah well, I'm bringing you with me next time. I don't think I can put myself through it again."

When he finally recovered, Techno nodded his head. Taking the apple back from Phil and biting into it. "Fine."

Chapter 4

The plan was to get this chapter out on Sunday but your comments were so sweet, they just really motivated me and I got this done a lot quicker than I'd expected so here it is!!

Thanks so much to the people reading this, I seriously appreciate it! <3

(I am also so sorry for this chapter in advance, stick with me there will be comfort I swear)

Techno couldn't sleep. Not that late nights were anything unusual for him but it definitely made focusing in class a hell of a lot harder.

When he'd first started staying with Phil, he'd constantly made it his dad's problem. Not intentionally, of course, but on occasion he'd bolt upright in the dead of night, screaming in pure terror until Phil would come running to him and not leave his side until he was feeling better.

At one point he'd decided that the pain of having to relive his past trauma and wake Phil up constantly wasn't worth it and just decided to not sleep at all. Admittedly, it was far from the best decision he'd ever made but he'd managed to survive for a few days by taking power naps on the couch before Phil got back from work and he had the house to himself.

When Phil found out he'd been forcing himself to stay awake at night, he had blamed himself for not realising sooner, even though Techno wanted to point out that it wasn't his fault. Back then it felt a little too much like talking back to an adult and in his experience nothing good ever came from challenging authority. So he kept quiet and let Phil sit him down on the couch curled up in a blanket as he warmed some milk on the hob.

He'd been confused at first. As far as he was concerned, milk was for babies and he was much too old for warm milk before bed but Phil had made it for him and he felt like he should at least try it.

Phil had turned the TV on and lowered the volume, though talked over it quietly as Techno sipped at his mug. To his surprise, the drink was unbelievably soothing and paired with Phil's voice, he soon found his eyes closing as he leant back into the arm of the couch.

He woke up the next morning in his own bed but from that night on Phil would continue to check on him and make sure he was at least getting enough sleep to function the next day.

After a few months Techno had thought he was over it. The nightmares were way less frequent and Phil trusted that he'd to come to him if there were any problems.

Then Techno was adopted and had finally settled into a sense of normality – hell, he'd even managed to figure out some kind of sleep schedule that seemed to be working for the most part, but that all went swiftly out the window with the addition of Tommy and Wilbur.

The thought of them, sleeping just across the hall, kept him up. It was something Techno knew he had to nip in the bud before it got worse and he inevitably began drifting off in class. So he had resorted to creeping down the stairs, in search of a mug of warm milk.

He knew Phil would make it if asked but he didn't want to wake his dad up when he had work the next day and besides, he considered himself old enough to make his own drinks.

As Techno reached the bottom of the stairs, he paused. Something felt wrong.

Though the house was completely silent, save for the wind and rain kicking up the potted plants on the porch, Techno decided to look around anyway. He had the distinct feeling that he was being watched.

He cast a glance over his shoulder, finding the stairs void of people, save for himself.

Then, he looked to his left and into the living room.

Wilbur was alone on the couch. Bathed in complete darkness, just staring at the wall and keeping quiet.

"What are you doing?" Techno didn't bother to whisper, though he did keep his voice low so as to not wake the others.

"I was waiting," he stopped and even in the dim light of the moon, seeping in through the window, Wilbur looked scared. "I know you come down at night. I can hear it when you walk past my room."

"You were waiting for me?" Techno couldn't keep the incredulity out of his voice.

Wilbur said nothing but nodded his head, swallowing so thickly Techno could see the bob of his Adam's apple.

"Why?"

"To, erm- talk to you."

"Okay," Techno moved slightly closer so that he joined Wilbur in the living room. He considered sitting down beside him but the kid seemed uncomfortable enough just being near him so Techno decided against it. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Did you tell Phil about my guitar?"

Techno blinked, not quite expecting the question.

"No, I didn't," he paused for a moment then looked up, his eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Should I?"

Wilbur's reaction was instant. "No, no, please don't! I won't give you any trouble, I swear. Tommy won't either, I know sometimes he gets upset but we'll leave you alone. We'll pretend we don't know you at school so you don't have to worry. I can pay you back if you want? Just tell me what you want and I'll get it, no questions asked, I-"

"Is that what you had to do?" Techno cut him off. He didn't mean to and he knew it was rude but they were getting nowhere with Wilbur's incessant babbling and he was working himself into a panic attack. "At your other houses, I mean."

There was a few seconds of silence where Techno had worried he'd crossed a line. After all, he'd liked to pretend he didn't have a past before Phil and it rarely ended well for anyone who brought it up. Wilbur was likely the same and he silently berated himself for being such an idiot.

Then, Wilbur spoke. "I used to have a guitar a long time ago. It was donated to some house or something I used to live in when I was a kid. We were young so nobody really knew how to play it. I taught myself. I'd keep it safe and practice when I was in my room.

"I'd never really gotten along with the other kids but it wasn't too hard to stay out of their way. I don't know what I did but it must've been bad because one night they just burst into my room. They tore it apart until they found it.

"There was a few of them that held me back – I couldn't move but I tried, so hard, I just- I couldn't and then they smashed it. Right in front of me. They thought it was hilarious, kept bringing up weeks later."

"Didn't you say something?"

When Wilbur looked up his eyes were wet with unshed tears. "Of course I did. They found me curled up in a ball hyperventilating. The kids got in trouble but it was nothing. I could see it on their faces every time they passed me in the hallway like they'd do it again."

"Kids can be cruel." Techno didn't quite know what to say. Though it was likely the first genuine thing Wilbur had said to him, he wasn't quite sure where it came from or how he tied into it.

Wilbur laughed bitterly. "Yeah."

"Your new one."

Wilbur hummed, not looking Techno in the eye, instead fixating on his hands, clenching in his lap.

Techno was very aware he was treading on thin ice but took the gamble anyway and pressed further. "If they broke your old one, what's with the one you've got upstairs?"

"It was- it was Tommy."

Techno grit his teeth. Of course, Tommy was already notorious for stealing what wasn't his. It wasn't too much of a leap in logic to assume he was also working for Wilbur.

"You need to get a better thief, that kid isn't as subtle as he thinks he is."

Wilbur's head snapped up immediately, eyes blown wide.

"It's not like that! Tommy didn't-"

"Sure," Techno's voice dripped with sarcasm.

"It was only a few months after I met Tommy. We got put into a home together, I just mentioned that I used to play guitar. I didn't mean for anything to come of it. I mean, I'd always known Tommy had a stash of money but he'd never let me see where he was keeping it – all I knew was that there was a lot.

"He was planning on saving it up; wanted to run away. I didn't really care, it's not like it was any of my business anyway. I just wanted to age out of the system, that was my plan from day one but then there's this fucking awful kid who's loud and never stops talking." Wilbur spoke fondly, eyes gentle as he looked at nothing in particular. "Then one day he just drops this bloody guitar on my lap. He'd spent everything he had on it – said he didn't care about running away if I wasn't going to go with him."

"So he didn't steal it?"

"No." Wilbur shook his head then looked up at Techno again. "It's the only thing I own. I- please- just let me keep it."

"I wasn't planning on taking it or whatever."

"Every house I'd been to, if there were kids who found out, they'd make me do something, you know? It was a bit like buying protection."

"You think I want something in exchange for minding my own business?" Techno thought the words sounded ridiculous even when said out loud but Wilbur nodded his head eagerly.

"Sometimes they'd ask for money, or a willing punching bag, or drugs."

"And you'd just do it? You'd really stick your neck out for a *guitar*?"

"Yeah." Wilbur bit his lip as if waiting for something. "So… what do you want?"

Techno blanched, fighting to force out the words that were on the tip of his tongue. "Nothing. I really don't care if you've got an instrument or not and Phil wouldn't either."

It only served to intensify Wilbur's nerves and he whined at the mention of Phil's name, shaking his head.

"Adults don't like it – it's noisy. One time, one of my foster mothers tried to take it from me. She would only let me have it if I was good and I tried – I tried *so* hard but it was never enough." Wilbur was tugging nervously at the hem of his jumper. "It's worse when it's adults because I have to do what they say, I can't fight back."

"And you can fight me?" Techno winced as soon as the words left his lips. He could have predicted the consequential outburst a mile away.

"No, no I won't I swear! I didn't mean it! I wouldn't, I- please, please, just-"

"It's alright." Techno began as soothingly as he could, though it was something he'd never had to do before so he doubted it was helping. He held his hands out in front of him so Wilbur could see he wasn't making any sudden moves, not sure if it was calming Wilbur at all or making him look ridiculous but it was something Phil always did when he got worked up. "I won't tell Phil, okay?"

There was a slight delay as Wilbur processed the words then nodded his head jerkily.

"You can keep your guitar. I won't tell Phil and I don't want anythin', we can just pretend I don't know about it."

Wilbur didn't look at all convinced. He eyed him with distrust for a moment then seemed to crumble, folding in on himself.

"You're his kid, if you wanted to break it you could and I couldn't stop you."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You might!" Wilbur insisted. "What if one day you get annoyed with us and just think 'fuck it'. I mean, if I get upset over it I'll get sent back and then I'll lose Tommy too – I can't lose Tommy too."

"I know it's hard but you've just gotta believe me."

The unamused glare was not unexpected, after all Techno knew he'd been the same when Phil had first taken him in. He was automatically sceptical of any kindness and had believed that there would always be strings attached.

Then it hit him.

"Stay here."

Wilbur looked terrified but nodded obediently as Techno padded back out and into the hallway.

"Where are you going?" Wilbur called after him with poorly concealed panic as Techno passed by the stairs but still stayed rooted in place, like he feared the consequences of disobedience when Techno already had so much over him.

Techno ignored him, shuffling about in the hallway as Wilbur waited impatiently for his return, though as soon as he entered the living room, the kid seemed to grow more anxious.

Then Techno held out his hand, fingers uncurling to reveal his small keychain.

"This is one of the most precious things I own. It's a gift from a good friend."

Techno felt embarrassed even talking about his feelings but it seemed to ease some of the tension from Wilbur's shoulders so he figured it was worth it.

"Dream?" Wilbur tilted his head.

"Nah, his name's Ranboo - nicest guy you'll ever meet. Here," Techno nodded towards Wilbur. "Take it."

Gingerly, Wilbur uncurled enough to pluck it delicately from Techno's had, watching as it glistened grey-purple in the moonlight.

"I'm not giving it to you. I'll want it back at some point." Techno's voice was firm and Wilbur took the underlying threat seriously. "But you can borrow it for now. Just so you've got something I care about. It can be like insurance or whatever, so you know I won't break your shit since you'll be able to break mine. It's only fair, right?"

"Right." Wilbur looked to be running on autopilot, seemingly out of words and exhausted and still reeling from the whiplash he felt from the unexpected direction the conversation seemed to take.

Techno stretched and blinked tiredly as he made his way for the door, glancing back at Wilbur who still seemed fixated on the tiny charm he held up in front of his face.

After the lengthy conversation with Wilbur, Techno figured he likely wouldn't even need a steaming cup of milk to send him to sleep, he already felt drained and like he'd socialised enough for the whole week. Still, he would be grateful for something to keep his thoughts off of Wilbur's disturbing past if only for a few minutes.

He poured milk into a pot and cranked up the heat of the hob, then reached into the cupboards for a mug. He hesitated for a minute then pulled out two mugs, setting them down on the counter and filling them both.

He took one in each hand as he made his way back down the hallway, meeting Wilbur in the hall with one foot on the first step.

"Here," Techno pressed one of the mugs into Wilbur's hands, as the boy just blinked at him confused. "It always helps me sleep at night."

"Thank you," Wilbur said and it sounded like he meant it.

~*~

Wilbur and Tommy didn't really agree with school and school didn't seem to agree with Wilbur and Tommy, though Techno suspected it was likely Tommy causing a majority of the issues with Wilbur being not far behind on damage control.

Every morning seemed to be a battle getting thee boys out of bed. Wilbur looked like he hadn't slept at all and Tommy was generally snappier and more likely to pick fights over nothing.

While sat at the table for breakfast, it had become an unspoken rule to let Tommy reach for a slice of toast first, lest he launch himself over the table and pry it from your hands and as much as Techno wanted to push back he never found the energy in the morning.

Wilbur would walk about as if in a trance, grey bags beneath his eyes and weary as he stumbled downstairs. Techno had bumped into him once as they met on the landing and tried to walk down the stairs at the same time. Wilbur didn't acknowledge him, though as soon as their bodies made contact, the kid yelped, hitting the floor and scrambling backwards as if Techno had attacked him. They never mentioned the incident, desperately clinging to a fragile sense of normality.

They never stayed late after school unless Tommy had ended up with a detention. Such cases were becoming more and more common and Wilbur would hang back with him. Techno had passed him by as he stood dutifully outside the detention room, waiting for Tommy's time to be up so they could head home together.

Techno had stayed late to study in the library. His GCSEs were coming up and he reasoned that he could never be too prepared, so he was trying to get in at least 2 nights a week of library study. Years ago he'd never even considered studying for tests but he knew he was smart enough to do decently and Phil would be so proud come results day.

The hallways were eerily quiet but Techno had come to like it. Most of the kids had gone home with only the occasional teacher wishing him a good evening on his way out.

He passed the detention classroom, though Wilbur wasn't outside. Techno peeked in through the small window and scanned the remaining students sat at desks. It seemed as though Tommy had managed to avoid getting in too much trouble and was likely already home.

Techno took the bus home, sitting far back where he had a view of the entire ground floor. There was only one other girl on aside from himself and she was too busy scrolling through her phone to pay him any mind but it was comforting to know that nobody was planning on sneaking up on him while he wasn't looking. He'd made that mistake at one of his previous homes and from then on always made sure he got the rearmost seat.

The walk home from the bus stop was the worst part. The sky was a dark blue, overcast and windy and he fought against the gale to the front door. The living room light was on and spilling out onto the lawn through slats in the blinds. By the time he had it open he was miserable and in desperate need of a hot drink.

As he stepped inside he froze.

Wilbur and Tommy's shoes where kicked off by the door along with their coats.

The house was filled with *sound*.

Techno was a quiet kid most of the time and even when he wasn't, he'd never call himself noisy. Phil rarely shouted and when he did it wasn't without good reason so to return home and find the house thrumming with music was a whole new experience.

It was distinctly a guitar - the signature strumming was obvious. The less obvious was Wilbur's voice. He was always there to talk and mediate to stop conflict from escalating but Techno hadn't ever questioned if he could actually sing. Hell, the guy always seemed slightly too timid to actually raise his voice, like he expected the backhand that would follow. Techno could sympathise, he'd been there.

Amongst Wilbur's melodious singing, Tommy could also be heard joining in though with a lot less regard for staying in tune as his brother. The kid seemed to be belting his heart out much to Wilbur's amusement.

There was also stomping and clapping and honest to god laughter.

Techno couldn't take it anymore. He quietly edged closer to the living room doorway and sure enough the two of them were bounding about, dancing to the rhythm of Wilbur's guitar.

For the first time since they had moved in, Techno saw them smiling. It wasn't the shy upturn of lips Wilbur sent Phil to be polite and it wasn't Tommy's self-assured smirk. They were having fun. They looked like kids.

Techno stood there unmoving, afraid to breathe but unable to look away. Then in the midst of his chaotic dancing Tommy looked over and met his eye, stopping dead in his tracks.

Wilbur caught the change in atmosphere immediately. His hands stilled over the strings, looking first to Tommy then past him to Techno.

Wilbur's face contorted into a range of emotions, most notably a blend of despair and fear.

"I- I can explain!"

Tommy whipped around to look at Wilbur, somewhat unsettled by the way his brother shook and gripped his instrument tightly.

Technoblade looked at Wilbur, seemingly moments away from throwing himself on the ground and pleading for mercy. That was definitely not something he would know how to go about handling.

"Look, I mean, it wasn't the worst thing in the world…" Wilbur looked up from the spot on the floor he had been staring at and Techno took that as a sign to continue. "It's actually kind of good. Not that I thought you'd be bad! But if you wanted to play your guitar downstairs sometimes I, uh, I wouldn't be against it - if you wanted to."

Neither one of the kids said anything. Tommy was whispering something to Wilbur in a way that was so uncharacteristically quiet that it actually succeeded in thoroughly freaking Techno out, while Wilbur just looked at him glassy-eyed.

"Okay then, that's… that's great. I guess I'll just go now. Leave you both to it then."

He backed up and retreated down the hallway. As expected, Wilbur didn't start up playing again and soon after their exchange, Techno could hear the sound of them retreating to their rooms.

~*~

"You wanted to see me?" Techno asked wringing his hands while keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

He'd been asked to come by his English teacher's office during lunchtime for a chat.

He wasn't quite sure what he'd done this time but it couldn't have been good. In his experience having to hang back after class generally wasn't particularly fun. He absently wondered if it was something to do with Tommy and Wilbur but dismissed the thought as soon as it entered his head. The foster kids were responsible for a lot of the bad shit in his life right now but they didn't share any classes together, it just wouldn't be realistic. Then again, logical thought seemed to evade him while he was stressed.

"Ah, yes, Techno come in," Miss Thompson looked up from her laptop. "Have a seat."

Techno nodded stiffly but took a seat opposite her desk. He didn't even know why he was here. He *liked* English, it was his favourite subject and Miss Thompson was nice.

Techno had been trying so hard. His grades were flawless, he listened in class. He didn't know where he went wrong. With a sinking feeling, Techno wondered if they'd called Phil or if he'd be spared the humiliation of having his dad dragged in to listen to the ways he'd fucked up again.

"Sorry to pull you away from your lunch."

Techno shifted, eyes down and looking at his hands knotted in his lap. "It's fine."

"I was just wanting to talk to you a bit about your grades."

"Oh…"

Techno thought he'd been working hard enough, Phil was always happy with his report card. He got his homework in on time and he was always praised in class whenever he had a mock paper handed back to him with a ridiculously high number scribbled in the corner in red pen.

"They are brilliant. With the level of work you're producing at the moment you'll fly through your GCSEs with no problem – not that you shouldn't still study for them of course – but you're well on track for a very impressive set of results."

Techno felt his breath catch in his throat. He was here because he was… good? Apparently really good from the look on Miss Thompson's face as she smiled knowingly at him.

"Thank you."

She nodded at him and tapped at the trackpad on her laptop.

"I was just wondering if you'd given any thought as to what you'd like to do after you finish."

"I'd like to do A-levels."

"Of course, I was thinking about after that." Techno blinked owlishly at her and when she seemed to realise that she wasn't going to get a response, she cleared her throat and tried again. "Techno, have you thought about university?"

"No."

Truth be told, Techno had never thought his grades were good enough to ever be considered. Higher education never even seemed like a realistic possibility until now and he found himself entertaining the thought slightly self-indulgently.

He could study away at some fancy campus somewhere, pursue the subjects he was truly passionate about and get a good job. He didn't quite know what but he'd figure it out somewhere along the way.

"I think it's definitely worth considering. I've got a few leaflets from some local institutions, hang on," she pulled open a drawer on her desk and retrieved a few brightly coloured leaflets, sliding them over to Techno who picked them up carefully. "Those are just some of the ones nearby in case you don't want to be too far away from home. We work with a lot of them quite closely so if you think of any questions I could send them off for you."

Techno nodded and looked through the leaflets. He skimmed though them until his eyes found the course prices and he balked.

"Are they really that expensive?"

"Most of them are, unfortunately, but look here," she flipped the one he was holding over, pointing to a small paragraph on the back about finance. "Most of, if not all, of them have some kind of high achiever scholarships. If you go as you mean to continue I've got no doubt that you'll qualify for one."

"Right."

"Don't worry about it too much, you've still got plenty of time before you've got to worry just yet but you might want to have a chat with your dad about it when you get home."

Techno nodded. "Sure."

He was still reeling even after he left Miss Thompson's office.

He actively sought out Ranboo at lunch, which he found strange since it was usually the other way around. His friend was a lot more outwardly happy for him and the excitement with

which he spoke was contagious to the point where Techno was actually considering it. He could *actually* go to university. He *could* do it.

By the end of the day he practically ran home from the bus stop even though he knew Phil wouldn't get home until later. Without anyone around to see him, he took a slight detour through the woods, smiling to himself and giddy as he leapt over logs and darted around tree trunks. His uniform was at risk of getting dirty but he'd have time before Phil got back to wipe his shoes down of mud and chuck his shirt into the hamper.

He felt amazing, like not even Tommy and Wilbur could ruin his mood. Techno fought the urge to take the leaflets from his bag again, look over the glossy images of fancy architecture and paragraphs upon each institution's prestigious reputation. He decided to wait until Phil got home – they could go through them properly together.

Upon actually reaching the door, Techno noticed that it was unlocked.

He pushed it open.

The first thing he heard was Phil's voice. It sounded strained, like he was fighting back some kind of emotion. His footsteps could be heard softly on carpet and it didn't take Techno long to realise he was pacing.

Shrugging off his coat and shoes by the door, Techno quietly crept into the living room holding his school bag in his hands.

"-right, right, I'll be there as quickly as I can."

Phil let out a quiet sigh as he brought the phone down from his ear, he gripped it tightly muttering something under his breath, brows knitted together.

He looked like he was in pain, Techno realised, but he didn't look hurt, just shaken up and unsettled by whoever was on the other end of the phone.

Then Phil straightened up and spun around to face the doorway where Techno was standing.

"Phil?"

"Not now, Techno, I've got some stuff to take care of."

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Phil walked past him and into the hallway. "Nothing's wrong, I've just got to go get Tommy and Wilbur – they've gotten into a bit of trouble at school."

"Right…" Techno watched as Phil flittered about, throwing on his dark green coat and pulling his car keys from the hook on the wall. "When will you be back?"

"I don't know." Phil sighed and smiled at him though it didn't reach his eyes. "Grab some food for yourself though just in case, I think we've got pizza in the fridge. I'll try not to be too long."

Phil ruffled his hair half-heartedly on his way out the door and Techno stood by the window as he watched the car reverse out of the driveway.

Techno looked from his school bag then to the kitchen, he really wasn't hungry.

Then he grit his teeth and took a seat on the couch, folding his arms over his chest.

He would wait as long as it took.

At this point Techno considered himself very used to the way Wilbur and Tommy tried damn hard to ruin any good thing he had going for him, so they sure as hell wouldn't get this.

Techno sat on the couch as the sun dropped in the sky, casting shadows over the living room that stretched and morphed as time dragged on.

The room grew darker - not that Techno noticed. He'd dropped his bag by his feet and pulled out the leaflets, setting them on the coffee table even though the excitement had long since burnt out. It left behind a soldering anger that flickered behind his eyes while he sat with his whole body tense and coiled tight as a spring waiting to burst as he watched the driveway with unrestrained resentment.

He had trusted Phil about the foster kids. Phil had never been wrong in a way that mattered. It had always been small things like whether or not Techno would like the new flavour of ice cream in the parlour downtown or what time their show started but when it came to the big decisions Techno had always trusted him and he had always been right – but not this time. Techno was absolutely done with Wilbur and Tommy. Fuck talking about university, he wanted these kids gone and Phil was going to know about it.

He was done with losing sleep, he was done with walking on eggshells, he was done with having to hide his valuables.

Technoblade was absolutely done with Wilbur and Tommy.

It took nearly 2 hours.

There wasn't much time between the car pulling up in the driveway and the front door being flung open.

Tommy stormed in the house first, throwing his bag down and not bothering with his shoes as he stood in the hallway.

As expected, Wilbur wasn't far behind, shucking off Techno's old coat and hurriedly hanging it by the door before taking to Tommy's side. He had a hand on Tommy's shoulder but the kid shrugged him off violently.

Techno stood up, more than ready for a fight if that's what the kid wanted. He had plenty of time to mull over some choice words he knew wouldn't fail to get Phil's attention.

Phil was the last one through the door and he shut it carefully behind him, closing them away from the frigid chill of the evening air that tried to follow them into the house.

Phil, Techno noted, looked a lot older than he had before he left. His shoulders sagged in defeat and his eyes seemed to droop as he moved slowly about, gathering Tommy's discarded bag and hanging it up and out of the way.

"Tommy…" Phil bean quietly with a sigh. "Could you please try to stay out of trouble? If there's kids that are- if they're being bastards could you just talk to me about it?"

Tommy turned on Phil so quickly he had to have given himself some form of whiplash.

"Oh yeah?" Tommy's smile was vicious. "And what the fuck are you gonna do about it? Huh?"

"Tommy." Wilbur hissed from beside him but the kid was on a warpath.

"No, go on. I want to hear this, what the actual fuck do you think you can do about it, big man?"

"I can- when Techno first started he-"

"I don't give a fuck about Techno. Techno is different. Nobody messes with Techno because he goes around *stabbing* people with long-ass *swords*."

"What?" Phil frowned. "Tommy, that's just fencing, it's not actually fighting-"

"Oh my God, you are so annoying. You just never *stop*."

"I don't stop because I care. I care about you and Wilbur and I want to make sure-"

"*Bullshit*." Tommy looked downright murderous. His hands were curled into fists at his sides and he was shaking. "Don't say that. Don't you ever fucking say that to me again."

"It's the truth."

"No. No, it's not. You think I haven't been here before, old man? Fuck no, I've done this over and over again. You think I don't see through this bloody stupid façade you've got going? Well, you're wrong and you now what? I don't care. So fuck it, use me for the payout. Take the money and then dump me on some stranger's doorstep, I'm over it at this point, but I will not sit quietly and be the golden child you and everyone else want me to be."

"That's not what I want. Tommy I don't give a shit about the money, I just want you to be *happy*. I want you to feel safe at home and at school-"

"Fuck. You." Tommy spat the words. "Seriously, you can just stop now. You don't care about me and I sure as hell don't care about you. I hate this house so much. I hate Techno and I hate *you*."

Tommy bit down on his bottom lip to keep it from trembling then he turned and ran, bounding up the stairs. Wilbur didn't linger, following at Tommy's heels.

There was the loud slam of a door then 3 seconds of very loud silence. It rang in Techno's ears as he looked at Phil carefully. He wasn't sure if he should call out to him from the darkness of the living room or just leave him be. He didn't even know how to go about it, if he should just feign ignorance so Phil could save face or if it was best to sit with him and let Phil talk about it in his own time.

He didn't have time to choose however as Phil was doubling over and sinking to his knees. His shoulders shook and he pressed a hand to his mouth as he tried to supress his sobs.

Techno froze. He'd never seen Phil actually cry like this. They'd both shed the occasional tear at sad movies but watching his dad sobbing very quietly in the hallway was something new and something terrible.

Like he'd been doused with cold water, his anger towards Phil had been killed and replaced with a searing pain through his chest. Phil had tried, he'd tried *so* hard to work with the kids and he'd been left fighting back tears because if it.

As much as he wanted to follow Wilbur and Tommy upstairs, he knew he couldn't. Phil had always been there when Techno was upset, so Techno needed to be there to comfort him.

Tentatively and with a gentleness Techno didn't know he possessed, he padded out into the hallway. Phil's head shot up as Techno's feet entered his peripheral.

Techno tried not to wince as he finally saw the tear tracks that ran down Phil's face.

"Techno?" Phil's voice broke on the word and Techno felt a pang in his heart as Phil coughed in an attempt to hide it. He watched as Phil placed one hand on the floor to push himself up but Techno stopped him.

Without saying a word, Techno knelt down and fell into Phil's arms. It was more affectionate than he'd been since he was very young and he hoped to God it was the right thing to do.

When he was a kid, Phil's hugs always made him feel better when he was sad, so it seemed logical that it would help cheer Phil up somewhat or at least take his mind off the kids upstairs. Though he almost regretted it as soon as he had done it. Phil always asked if he was okay to be hugged before actually doing it and Techno was hit with the realisation that maybe Phil didn't want to be touched – maybe he was making it worse.

But then he felt Phil bring his arms up to pull Techno closer and he let out a sigh of relief.

"Dad?" Techno couldn't see Phil's face but could feel the way his arms tightened around him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah… yeah, I'm fine, you don't have to worry about me."

Techno nodded and sat with Phil as he calmed down.

After several minutes, Phil's tears had dried up and he was no longer shaking but Techno didn't let go – he wanted Phil to be the one to decide when he felt like getting up. It took some time but eventually, Phil gave him a little nudge.

"I don't know about you but I'm feeling a bit hungry after all that."

Techno nodded and stood up.

"There should be some stuff in the fridge that I can pop in the oven. Did you eat that pizza?"

"No."

"Techno…" Phil shook his head fondly. "You can't just not eat anything."

"I know."

"Well, I'll put it on and give you a shout when it's done, okay?"

Techno shook his head as Phil raised an eyebrow at him. Instead of explaining, Techno lead Phil over to the living room, urging him to sit down on the couch before flicking the lamp on and pressing the remote control into his hand. He had also managed to slide the university leaflets under a newspaper on the coffee table to be revisited at a later point, now really wasn't the right time.

"I'll do dinner tonight."

"This is really sweet but I know you've got school tomorrow, don't push yourself too hard."

"I'm not."

"I need to make stuff for Tommy and Wilbur too," Phil made to stand up but Techno didn't let him.

"I'll do it."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

Phil sat back and smiled, Techno figured he must have done something right as Phil seemed a lot less tense than he had several minutes prior.

Techno spilt the pizza between himself and Phil and managed to find a bag of chicken nuggets and chips in the freezer which he reluctantly heated up for Wilbur and Tommy. If Phil wasn't so adamant they eat, Techno wouldn't have even bothered. Still, when the food was plated up, he carried it dutifully up the stairs and left one outside both kids' rooms. He didn't knock or linger, not quite trusting himself to refrain from tearing them apart for the state in which they'd left Phil.

Though Techno was sure he wouldn't be able to undo the damage caused by the kids upstairs he figured he was at least somewhat good at taking Phil's mind off it. They ate their dinner in the front room with the TV playing whatever Netflix had to offer. Techno made sure to pick something loud and action-packed to grab their attention so that Phil wouldn't have to think too hard while watching it.

There was a brief moment where Techno was sure he'd heard a door open and shut again upstairs, so he reached for the remote and turned the volume up. If Phil noticed, he didn't say anything.

Chapter 5

Thank you so much to everyone reading this and to the people who left comments on my previous chapters!!

I don't think I can thank you all enough and explain how happy I am to hear from you guys, it really does mean so much to me and I am super grateful for every single person who took the time to comment <3

We're officially at the halfway point and I think you're all overdue some much needed comfort but I am going to warn that it gets worse before it gets better. Please check through the tags again, I've edited them a bit and want to make sure you're prepared in case of anything upsetting.

This is as graphic as the fic gets and features scenes of violence and injury as well as continuous references to past abuse so please read with caution and stay safe.

Thank you all again and hope you enjoy!

Techno was doing his best to avoid the brothers and it appeared that the feeling was mutual. They were overly cautious about staying as far away from each other as they could while still having to live under one roof, which was becoming increasingly tedious but nobody was even remotely willing to entertain the alternative.

Phil pretended that it didn't bother him to see the kids completely miserable but Techno figured he was just giving them time and space. After all, it had worked when he'd first fostered Techno and while he wanted to tell Phil that maybe these kids just wouldn't ever fit into their family, he couldn't quite bring himself to do it.

At the end of the day, Phil was trying his best to help them and Techno really didn't want to be the person who ruined it – not after Phil had tried so hard to make them feel welcome. Despite wanting to spare Phil's feelings, Techno was burdened with the knowledge that they couldn't go on like this for much longer.

Either Wilbur and Tommy would have to go, or they'd learn how to live together and while Techno realised that a confrontation was inevitable, it definitely wasn't something he realised would happen quite so quickly.

It was the weekend and Phil had stepped out to run errands in town, leaving the 3 boys at home. Techno had made the most of a rare dry day and spent a majority of his time in the

garden doing what he could in the hopes that at least some of his plants survived the oncoming winter.

After finishing up, he padded into the living room only to notice the glow of the kitchen light. Curiosity piqued, he poked his head inside.

"What are you doing?"

Techno stood in the kitchen doorway, arms folded over his chest and glaring down at Tommy who was holding a beige tote bag in both hands.

"Nothing."

Techno would have been more inclined to believe him if the kid didn't look so damn guilty.

"What's in the bag?"

Tommy's grip tightened as Techno nodded towards him but the kid stood his ground, lip curling into a snarl as he fixed Techno with a pointed stare.

"That's none of your business."

Tommy also didn't seem to be in the mood to keep his voice down. Techno couldn't tell whether he was trying to be intimidating or obnoxious or maybe a combination of both.

"I think you'll find it is my business seein' as though my things keep going missing."

Tommy shuffled back ever so slightly and tried to glance past him but it was clear that Techno was big enough so that a dash for the door would almost definitely be blocked.

"What exactly is it that you're implying?"

"I'm implyin' that you're a thief."

They stared silently for several seconds, nobody quite daring to breathe with only the hum of the fridge freezer to fill it.

Then Tommy shrugged, seemingly indifferent, trying his best to seem nonchalant as he attempted to walk confidently past Techno and slip out the door.

"You can think whatever you want, it's not like you've got any proof."

Techno caught Tommy by the handle of the bag, trying to tug it from him.

"That's right, maybe you can show me what you've got in the bag and we can finally figure it out."

Despite the tension in the kid's body he didn't give it up, pulling away from Techno with as much strength as he could. It wasn't enough, however, and as Techno yanked particularly hard Tommy let out a yelp as he lost his grip on the bag and fell to the kitchen floor.

The kid landed hard on his chest, followed by a dozen golden apples dropping onto the floor beside him with quiet thuds.

Tommy nursed the arm he landed on, rubbing at the redness where it felt particularly sore. He looked up at Techno, insult on his lips but stilled as he saw the way Techno was looking from him to the apples then back to him again.

Techno wasn't the kind of guy to be open with his emotions, in fact he was the polar opposite but watching as the golden apples – his gapples that Phil had bought especially for him – come tumbling out of Tommy's bag was the final straw. His eyes were cold and flinty as he looked down at Tommy, gritting his teeth as he shook with a mixture of anger and upset.

He took a step forward and opened his mouth, more than ready to give the kid a piece of his mind but he faltered as Tommy scrambled back and shielded his head with his arms.

Techno didn't have enough time to feel regret before something was slamming into his back and sending him staggering forward, slightly disorientated.

When he turned around, he barely caught sight of Tommy being pulled out of the door behind Wilbur.

They were shouting, Techno realised, and he carefully followed them out of the kitchen. As the boys caught sight of him, Tommy shrieked and tried to pull Wilbur upstairs but the kid wasn't budging. He was staring at Techno like a deer in the headlights of a fast moving car.

"Wil, fucking *move*!"

Wilbur pushed Tommy off and shook his head muttering something quietly and firmly into Tommy's ear as the kid just shut his eyes and shook his head as if he were living a nightmare and was willing himself to wake up.

"Tommy, just go."

"*Please*." Tommy tried once more. "Please, Wil, don't do this."

But Wilbur was undeterred and pushed Tommy behind him and up the first few steps. Tommy hesitated again as he looked to Wilbur, eyes wet and lip trembling but clumsily climbed the rest of the way up regardless.

Techno inched closer, not quite sure how to feel. He was pissed off, sure, but now more than anything he was confused.

The kids were looking at him like he was an out-of-control axe murderer, instead of just their foster brother who they seemed to immensely dislike, and while life wasn't great before, Techno wished they could go back to quiet avoidance instead of all-out terror at the mere sight of him.

Wilbur stood at the bottom of the staircase, jaw set and eyes resolute as he watched Techno standing in front of him somewhat awkwardly.

The guy was tall, sure, but he was beyond lanky, there was no way he'd even be able to hold his own in a fight.

It felt insulting to admit but Wilbur was delicate. He was a musician who poured his soul into his craft, strumming softly on guitar strings and humming melodies. There was nothing about the guy that had anything even remotely to do with violence – not in the same way Techno had experienced in the past.

But here he was, fists clenched at his side, stance wide and looking steely and unwavering as he stared Techno down.

It was too robotic, like he'd done this before and something about it felt off.

Techno turned his attention upwards to the landing where Tommy was crouched, peeking through the bannisters. It wasn't the Tommy Techno had gotten to know over the past few weeks, there was nothing boisterous or chaotic about this kid. His chest was heaving as he kept a hand clamped firmly over his mouth silencing the sobs that worked their way up his throat.

Then Wilbur shoved him.

"What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Techno barely moved at all. He was right – there was absolutely no weight behind the guys arms. It was enough to return his attention to Wilbur though, who looked considerably more pale than usual which Techno decided was probably not good.

There was a quiet shuffling and the sound of a door closing. Techno moved to look past Wilbur again and watch Tommy bolting into his room but as he did, he caught the sharp intake of breath Wilbur sucked in and the way he braced his entire body.

Something inside his head clicked and it all made sense.

Wilbur had no intention of fighting – he never did, he was posturing so Tommy would have time to hide. He was doing his best to deflect Techno's anger, to rile him up and make himself enough of a target so that he'd become the de facto punching bag and take a beating in Tommy's stead.

The thought of it make Techno nauseous.

He wasn't going to hurt Tommy – hurt either of them – he was frankly just annoyed that his shit kept going missing but now he couldn't care less.

Sure, he beat up kids before – but they were *bad* kids, one's who'd single him out and try taking his lunch money, or destroy his paper before he got to hand it in, or insult his foster parent – now dad. Those people deserved it, not Wilbur and Tommy.

He took a step back. Then another. Then another.

Wilbur was frowning in quiet confusion and Techno could only assume that these kinds of exchanges usually didn't end without him getting hit. Without saying anything else, because he wasn't actually quite sure what he was supposed to say in that sort of situation, he walked into the kitchen.

There was the small bundle of apples Tommy had tried to snatch still sitting on the floor. Techno gathered them into the little tote bag begrudgingly, they *were* Golden Delicious after all, but Techno didn't let it show on his face.

He turned back into the hallway where Wilbur was still standing guard at the bottom on the staircase.

He looked considerably worse than before, he'd taken to chewing on his bottom lip and tugging anxiously at the ends of his sleeves. The aggressive façade was in shambles but Techno felt way too bad to call him out on it.

Instead, he moved closer slowly trying not to make any sudden movements and make this godawful situation any worse. He wasn't quite sure if that was a good idea though judging by the way Wilbur seemed to curl in on himself slightly more.

Techno held out the bag of apples towards Wilbur who only glanced down at them nervously. It was unsettling, Techno thought, that someone so tall could look so very small in that moment.

"Give them to Tommy," Techno said, dropping the bag into Wilbur's hands.

He didn't wait for Wilbur to respond, the house was suddenly way too cramped and Techno needed fresh air and he needed it now.

He left thorough the front door, resolving to not come back for at least a few hours. Wilbur and Tommy definitely needed some time to themselves and Techno figured he felt much the same way.

~*~

Techno hung back after school, heading to the library under the guise of studying to avoid spending too much time at home. Things had gotten complicated after the 'gapple incident' as Techno had begun dubbing it. He still didn't like Tommy and Wilbur and wanted them gone but he couldn't fight the feelings of guilt, like maybe he didn't want them around because it made him realise just how little of a chance he actually gave them, how they were scared and vulnerable and Techno had completely traumatised them in the span of a few weeks.

He figured that if he were in their position that he'd fight back if he were unhappy, it wouldn't be the first time he'd sapped at a foster sibling and been thrown out for being

aggressive. But the more he thought about it, Tommy and Wilbur didn't exactly have that alternative. If they got sent back they'd likely be separated, after all Phil was more kind and accommodating than anyone else Techno had ever met. There was something ugly and terrifying about the fact that they were willing to tolerate abuse just so they could stay together.

Techno knew Tommy and Wilbur wouldn't say anything to Phil, even though Tommy was right – Phil liked them and definitely would take them seriously but at the end of the day it was a gamble. Phil could always side with Techno seeing as he was already adopted and, legally, his kid. It only made sense for the foster kids to avoid taking the risk.

Contrary to the rumours at school, Techno did have a moral compass and it was clearly pointing to the fact that he was wrong. He had fucked up and he had no idea how to even go about fixing it.

So, he decided to ignore the issue altogether. He couldn't scare the kids if he wasn't anywhere near them.

It was somewhat working. He had managed to mostly dodge conversation for the most part and being in different school years to Tommy helped him keep his distance.

It all ended rather abruptly as Techno headed home for the evening, leaving by the school's rear door so he could avoid interrupting the cleaners on his way to the bus stop.

It was an area of the school that was generally quiet seeing as though it was right beside the faculty car park which was empty since school had officially let out some time ago. Though as Techno rounded the corner, he heard the familiar sounds of a fight.

He grit his teeth and kept his head down, hoping to skirt around the confit and avoid being dragged into it. Whatever was going on wasn't anything to do with him and besides, he had a university application to worry about. A recent mark on his record for violence could ruin all that, despite how good his grades ended up being come summer time.

As he edged closer, Techno heard the dull thump of hands and feet colliding with someone's body. There was laughter and jeers and somewhere in the mix he could pick out the sound of thin metal, like someone had been thrown against the side of a bin.

Techno pointedly didn't look. It wasn't his problem, it wasn't his problem, it wasn't his problem.

He started at the sound of a sob. It was punctuated with pleads and whimpers and chocked breaths.

It was with a sigh of resignation that Techno looked up and saw Wilbur.

He was pinned against the ground, struggling against the people pressing him into the concrete. He had a purple bruise blooming around his eye swelling to the point where Techno doubted he could see much out of it. The kid's body was contorted and from the weight of those pressing down on him, he'd be surprised if he didn't walk away without at least a few

fractures. Wilbur's lip was split open in multiple places and bright red blood poured down his chin as he wailed as loudly as he could.

He was screaming, begging, pleading for them to leave Tommy alone and it was with a sinking feeling of dead that Techno looked over to see the kid trying to crawl away, scratching up his forearms and he struggled and kicked out as he was dragged back across the concrete.

It wasn't a fight; it was a beating.

It was at that moment, Wilbur's voice broke and he turned his head to the side to spit out a mixture of blood and saliva, that he met Techno's stare.

Wilbur looked at him in pain and fear and shame. He looked guilty, like he was at fault for not being able to keep his little brother safe.

It was enough to drown out the world around him for just a second and the way Wilbur's heavy gaze kept him rooted sent his mind reeling.

In that moment Techno felt like he had his hand curled around the neck of Wilbur's guitar, holding it above the ground, seconds away from bringing it down in a burst of splintered wood chips and noise.

Before he realised what he was doing, Techno was walking over, his body running on autopilot.

He made a beeline for Tommy. The kid was a lot younger than himself and Wilbur and a part of Techno felt like he needed to protect him.

The feeling was new and terrifying and he absently wondered if it's what Wilbur felt that night at the bottom of the staircase, but Techno didn't have time to mull over it for long as he was already grabbing the boy who had Tommy by the back of the shirt. He yanked him back and as soon as the boy went reeling, Techno slammed his fist into his nose.

It gave Tommy enough time to scramble free and get to his feet, though Techno could see the way he wobbled and staggered.

When the kid looked up he seemed genuinely surprised to see him.

"Techno?" He all but whispered.

Techno swallowed thickly but nodded. He fished his phone out of his pocket, his hands still shaking from the adrenaline and passed it to Tommy. The way his eyes lingered on Techno's bloody knuckles for a second too long wasn't lost on him.

"Ring Phil."

Tommy nodded and limped some distance away to find Phil's contact in Techno's phone.

It was a poor distraction and they both knew it but the kid Techno had punched was getting to his feet for round 2 and Wilbur was still being held down.

It was disturbing, Techno noted, how as soon as Tommy was in relative safety, Wilbur's fight had left him and he seemed to be grimly accepting of the fact that he didn't care about how the whole situation ended for himself.

Techno didn't wait, he sprung forward.

Each blow was hard and fast. Techno made sure to hit where he knew it would hurt, where they had bruised up Wilbur and Tommy.

Techno was a logical person, a thinker, but in that moment his train of thought completely derailed, leaving him running on emotions alone and entirely overcome by rage. It wasn't fair that they targeted kids who already had nothing, kids that were weak and vulnerable and did nothing wrong, kid's like Tommy and Wilbur who had somewhere along the way become more than just the annoying foster children Phil had taken in.

As far as Techno was concerned, they were hurting his family and he relished in the way he felt bone break beneath his fists as the attackers cried out in pain.

Somewhere in the back of his mind he registered the thought and filed it away to deal with later. He was more disturbed by his new attachment to the kids more so than the satisfaction that came with beating their attackers into the ground.

Most of the kids tried making a run for it. Tommy was clearly phoning for help, which was enough of a deterrent for those not wanting to be caught, and the rest tried to stagger away after seeing Technoblade in action.

There were a few stubborn kids who didn't let up and tried to jump him at the same time. Techno heard Tommy cry out and the sound was crystal clear amongst the dull buzzing in his ears and the rest of the world faded away.

He looked over just in time to see the kid pointing behind him, though he turned too late and caught a punch directly against his stomach.

It left him winded for a few precious seconds in which the boy tried to get in another hit but Techno saw it coming and dodged the blow narrowly.

Belatedly, Techno realised it was the boy from the bus that seemed to have it out for the foster siblings since their first day.

Techno grit his teeth.

If he had stuck around them a little more maybe they wouldn't have been made targets, if he talked about it back then Phil could have phoned the school, if he'd done something they wouldn't be in this situation.

He drove his knee up into the boy's gut, causing the kid to double over and giving Techno enough room to swing his elbow around and slam it against his skull. The boy went down

and Techno stood above him, breathing heavily.

"Wilbur!" With their attackers taken care of, Tommy deemed it safe enough to scramble to Wilbur's side. He was nudging him gently, though Wilbur was barely moving. "Wil, c'mon, you've got to get *up*. It's cold and Phil said he'd be here soon. He'll probably turn the heating on if we ask nicely and- and-"

Tommy was doing a poor job at trying to keep his voice calm and gentle, a distressed whine bled through and he kept whispering his brother's name over and over again as if it would somehow make him better.

Techno gingerly made his way over to Tommy and Wilbur, still somewhat awkward like he was expecting to be rejected and shoved away but Tommy shuffled over to make room for him.

From the corner of his eye, Techno also saw the boy who'd collapsed on the ground trying to get away. Techno felt an instinctual urge to go after him, yank him back and ram his head into the ground several times to really get the message across that Wilbur and Tommy were off limits.

A pitiful whine from Tommy brought him back to reality as he shook his head and turned his attention to Wilbur.

His hands hovered over the kid's body as he tried to figure out how to best go about flipping him over. Tentatively, he gripped Wilbur by the shoulders and rolled him onto his back, noticing the way his eyelids fluttered and he stared at Tommy as though he wasn't really seeing him.

"Tommy?"

Wilbur's voice was quiet and slightly slurred, Techno figured that the blood from his split lip wasn't helping matters and he gently tipped Wilbur's head to one side to he could empty his mouth onto the ground.

"It's okay, Wil, I'm here. Techno-" Tommy eyed him slightly warily. "Techno's here too. You're gonna be okay."

Tommy dove for Wilbur's hand to give it a reassuring squeeze but Wilbur cried out in pain and tried to roll away. Tommy leapt back as if burned.

"Sorry, sorry, oh God I'm so sorry."

"It's just sprained." Techno said with as much conviction as he could muster. For all he knew Wilbur's hand could be broken but Tommy needed reassurance and Techno was new to the whole comforting business. "He'll be fine."

Tommy nodded though he didn't look convinced.

"Is Phil on his way?" Techno asked softly.

"Yeah, should be." Techno looked over at Tommy quizzically who shrank back under his stare. "I- I mean he said he was coming, so he probably is but I, er, I obviously don't know if he's actually going to show up – I mean, I called him from your phone and you're his kid so if he knows you're with me, he'll probably come, right?"

"Phil will always come if you need him." Techno then looked away before adding somewhat bashfully, "even before he adopted me, whenever I needed him he was there."

Wilbur shivered violently and rolled over to cough and hack onto the pavement again, spitting up globs of dark red blood and phlegm as he moaned in pain. Techno gave him a moment then eased him onto his back again.

"Take it easy, don't lean on your ribs too much, there you go. Just try breathing."

Wilbur moaned in pain, eyelids fluttering shut as his face twisted in agony.

"Hurts."

"I know but just try staying awake for a little bit longer."

Wilbur tried to roll about, seemingly unable to get comfortable no matter how he twisted and turned. Techno tried to stop him from doing any more damage, catching him before he were to roll onto his front and disturb his ribs any more.

"Gone?" Wilbur was panting now, shallow breaths escaping his damaged lips.

Techno looked at Tommy who was biting at his nails. The kid didn't seem to have any idea what Wilbur was going on about but Techno had to keep him talking just a little bit longer.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"Kids…" Wilbur's words were slurred to the point Techno had trouble picking them out among the pitiful whines and hisses of pain. "…Gone?"

"The kids are gone, I got rid of them." Then after a second of hesitation, he hastily added, "Tommy's fine."

Wilbur seemed to process the words and then, without warning, burst into tears.

Techno had no idea if he'd made Wilbur feel better or worse but as soon as he opened his mouth to apologise Tommy was tugging at his sleeve. When Techno turned to him the kid flinched, which Techno felt like a knife through his heart. He pretended that it didn't bother him and tried to look as friendly as he could despite his clothes and knuckles being stained with blood.

"Yeah?"

Tommy just pointed in the direction of the faculty car park where a singular set of headlights could be seen pulling into a parking bay. Techno recognised it instantly as Phil's car.

Phil had already left the car and was sprinting over to meet them and Techno could see the sadness and rage on his face even under the awful streetlights.

"Stay here with Wilbur, I'll talk to Phil." Tommy blinked up at him as Techno got to his feet. "Just make sure he doesn't go to sleep."

Tommy nodded dutifully and began rambling loudly, improvising stories and questions as he took over from Techno.

Techno met Phil halfway and ran back the rest of the distance at his side.

"Techno, what the fuck happened?" Phil's face was devoid of colour. His eyes blown wide and looking a lot more scared than Techno had ever seen him.

"I left school and I saw these kids beating up Tommy and Wilbur. I got rid of them but Wilbur's hurt. I think he needs help."

Phil stopped beside Wilbur, who cringed as he caught Phil's eye.

"He needs a bloody hospital." Phil muttered quietly and Tommy stilled at the word, not quite voicing his opposition but clearly not very happy about the idea either.

Phil dropped to his knees, looking Wilbur over, assessing the damage was best he could.

"Hey there, mate. Can you hear me?"

Sluggishly Wilbur looked over at him, seemingly exhausted as though even turning his head left him drained.

"Hmm," Wilbur hummed in affirmation.

"Okay that's a good start. I need to get you to a hospital, so I'm gonna have to pick you up."

" 'm fine." Wilbur said even though it was blatantly clear he was not.

"Alright but I still need a doctor to look you over."

Phil carefully scooped Wilbur into his arms. Though the kid was relatively light, he was long and his legs looked comically large as he was gently held.

Wilbur weakly pushed against Phil's chest but gasped in pain and stopped fighting to avoid hurting himself further. Phil was whispering to him comfortingly as he delicately lay Wilbur across the backseats of the car.

"Tommy," Phil looked at him. "Are you hurt too?"

"No! No, I'm fine, really."

"Techno?" Phil looked to his eldest son.

Techno shrugged. "Just scratches from what I could tell."

Phil nodded somewhat grimly as he eyed Tommy with slight distrust.

"I'll look after Tommy." Phil and Tommy snapped their heads towards Techno. "Look, Wilbur's in a lot of pain and needs help now. We can't all fit in the car with Wilbur lying down, so I'll go home with Tommy and help him get cleaned up."

Phil hesitated for a minute then relented. "Okay, if you need anything at all make sure you ring me."

"I will."

"And if Tommy is hurt worse than you think…"

"Don't worry, we're fine." Techno nodded towards the car. "You sort Wilbur out."

Phil nodded tightly, his eyes hard as they stared into Techno's own. Techno had been around Phil long enough to know exactly what he was saying without needing him to vocalise it.

"I'll trust you with Tommy but please take care of him for me."

Phil then looked at Tommy and his gaze softened.

"Hey, mate, it's alright. Techno's gonna look after you while I make sure Wilbur's okay. If you need me Techno will give me a ring, okay? I'll always answer."

Tommy nodded but it was impossible to tell how he was feeling.

Then, as quickly as he dared with an injured child in the back of his car, Phil pulled out of the car park and joined the main road.

Techno waited as Tommy stood in silence and watched the car until it sped out of sight. Even then the kid didn't move, didn't look away, just stared transfixed.

Techno went to rest a hand on this shoulder but thought better of it and started walking in the direction of the bus stop.

"You coming?" He called out to Tommy.

The kid started then looked around as if beginning to realise where he was. Tommy then jogged to catch up. Techno expected the kid to be slightly wary and keep his distance, after all up until recently they had never really been on the best of terms but the kid stuck by his side like glue, Tommy's shoulder occasionally bumping him as the kid pressed closer.

Techno didn't comment on it. He didn't say much of anything. He had no idea if talking to Tommy would make him feel better or worse so he left the ball in the kid's court. If Tommy wanted to talk, Techno would oblige him but if the kid wanted to be on his own, he could respect that too.

When they reached the bus stop, Techno checked his phone and grimaced at the time. They'd missed the last school bus for the day, which meant that they'd have to walk to the nearest

neighbourhood, which wasn't far away but…

Tommy was shivering and his shoes were falling apart and Techno really didn't want to risk running into anyone they knew from school.

So, he decided to phone for a taxi. He knew it'd be a bit pricey, taxis always were when you lived as far out as Phil but Techno figured it'd be worth it alone for the fact that they could be driven straight to their doorstep.

Tommy seemed anxious as he shifted from foot to foot beside him. Techno pretended not to notice, the last thing he wanted to do was make Tommy feel self-conscious.

"What was that?" Tommy asked without looking at him, though Techno could see the way he braced himself in case he needed to leap out of arm's length.

"I was just phoning a taxi, the school buses don't run this late."

"Oh," Tommy bit his lip. "I haven't been in a taxi before."

"They aren't that exciting and they're always overpriced."

"I don't-" Tommy patted at his coat and then felt around in his pockets. "I don't have money, they took it- but I've got some back in my room! I can pay you back when we get to Phil's house."

Techno frowned at him. "Tommy, no, I'll pay for this, okay?"

"But-"

"It's fine, seriously."

Tommy nodded but gnawed on his lip nervously as they waited, casting curious glances at Techno every so often when he thought the oldest wasn't looking.

The taxi took over 15 minutes to arrive and at that point Techno figured they could have been on a bus and halfway home but he pushed the notion down and opened the door. He let Tommy in first before sliding in and fastening his own seatbelt. The kid didn't talk the entire ride home and said nothing even when Techno paid the driver and followed him outside.

When Techno finally got the front door open, Tommy wasted no time in toeing his shoes off, though Techno noted the way he kept his brother's coat on, even as he made for the stairs. Techno followed him but quickly realised that Tommy was heading for his bedroom.

"Hang on a second," Tommy froze, one hand on his doorhandle but he didn't turn around. A violent shiver wracked his body and Techno caught the way the kid inhaled sharply. "I need to treat your cuts."

Slowly, very slowly, Tommy turned around.

"You were being serious?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah, you got hurt."

"I didn't know you meant it…"

Techno cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

"I, um, I didn't know you were actually going to help me."

Techno rubbed the back of his neck. "I've got into a lot of fights, some were worse than others, so I know a thing or two about first aid."

"Right."

Techno padded over to the bathroom, flicking the light on and holding the door open as he nodded to Tommy. "Come on."

Tommy moved to follow him but each step was cautious, like he was expecting some sort of trap.

Flipping the toilet lid down, Techno patted it and Tommy took that as he cue to sit down. Techno opened the medicine cabinet and pulled out their first aid kit. Tommy eyed it warily as Techno set it down and opened the lid.

"I'm gonna need to see your arm."

Tommy whined but held it out for Techno to inspect.

As expected, the wounds weren't very deep at all, in fact if Techno had no idea how Tommy had got injured, he'd likely just assume the kid had fallen over. If it were him, he'd probably just run it under the tap and go about his day but because it was Tommy he felt like he needed to do more. He hated that fact that the kid was hurt at all and the familial pull drove him to be thorough and careful. He felt something sharp in his chest and tried to push the feelings of overwhelming sympathy and protectiveness aside until he at least got Tommy fixed up.

He reached into the box and pulled out an antiseptic wipe. He tore open the packaging, cringing as the smell hit his nose as he moved forward to press it against Tommy's arm.

"Will it hurt?"

Techno hesitated.

"Have you had an antiseptic wipe before?"

"Of course I have!" Tommy's voice was loud and echoed around the bathroom, as he sat affronted.

Techno felt some sort of relief. This was the Tommy he knew: loud, opinionated, fiery. At least the kid has parts of his usual personality shining through, which Techno would consider progress, however small.

"Then that's what it feels like."

Techno tried to appear nonchalant as he dabbed at Tommy's cuts but he made sure to keep a careful eye on the kid's face in case he was in too much discomfort.

Techno used two wipes, just to be sure. Tommy called him a sadist and rolled his eyes but let Techno work and kept relatively still.

When he was satisfied, Techno fixed a large plaster over the cuts and looked up at Tommy for approval. Tommy didn't even seem interested as he nodded his thanks.

"Can I check your bruises too?"

Tommy looked less than enthusiastic as he pulled the hem of his shirt down.

"I'm fine."

"I promise you, whatever it is, I won't bring it up."

Tommy's eyes widened marginally and his breath caught in his throat. For an awful moment, Techno thought he'd ruined it and sent Tommy into some trauma-fuelled panic attack but then, Tommy peeled his shirt up slightly, averting his eyes and biting his lip.

The first thing Techno noticed was the oval shaped bruise, it was clearly the toe of someone's shoe where they had slammed it into the kid's ribs and Techno suddenly felt very murderous again. He kept himself in check though for Tommy's sake and searched for any more injuries the kid wasn't telling him about.

That's when he noticed it.

A long thin scar that carved across his chest.

Techno recognised it for what it was – a knife wound and an old one at that.

Suddenly he wished Phil was here just so he could ask what exactly had he read on Tommy's file, or maybe it wouldn't be mentioned at all. Techno knew it was common to avoid this sort of thing altogether with vague language that made foster kids look more saleable to the irritable adults who want to take in a kid that won't cause them much trouble. The thought of it made Techno sick.

He wondered if Wilbur knew, if it was why he was so willing to throw himself head-first into danger and act as Tommy's makeshift shield. The guilt returned tenfold and Techno had to force himself to push it aside in favour of focusing on Tommy's current situation.

True to his word, though, he didn't mention it.

"How does it feel?" Techno's eyes returned to the purple bruise.

Tommy shrugged. "It doesn't feel *nice* but, like, it doesn't really hurt much unless I touch it."

"Well don't touch it."

"I wasn't planning on it."

"And if it gets worse, let me know and I can grab you some ice."

"Hmm," Tommy hummed and Techno wasn't sure if he didn't believe him or if he just didn't care. Both options were concerning and Techno was once again struck with the fact that he was at least slightly responsible for the sight in front of him.

He abandoned his pride, closed the lid of the first aid kit and looked up to meet Tommy's eyes.

"I'm sorry."

The kid tilted his head in confusion. "Why?"

"I was kind of a jerk to you and Wilbur. I'm sorry- I- I know it doesn't make up for anything but I really am."

"It's fine," Tommy shrugged.

"I mean, it's really not," Techno sighed. "That wasn't the first time they'd bothered you, was it?"

There was a flash of anger in Tommy's eyes and he frowned but then stopped and collapsed in on himself, curling into a ball.

"It's never been that bad," he began quietly. "They'd just yell stuff at first but then they started pushing us around a bit and then today they were giving Wil shit so I yelled back at them, even though Wilbur told me not to." Tommy sucked in a shaky breath. "It, um- it all went downhill from there."

Techno couldn't keep the rage off his face. It's been happening for weeks – *weeks* – and they'd just been putting up with it. He should have *done* something.

When he looked back to Tommy, the kid didn't look like he was breathing. He was keeping very still and studying Techno as if he were a wild animal about to lurch forwards and maul him.

"You're angry…" Tommy said and then immediately clamped his mouth shut, the regret that followed was obvious on his face.

It was no use denying it and Techno signed, letting himself relax so he could at least stop scaring the kid any more.

"I'm *really* angry," Tommy whimpered and shrank back. "But not at you – or Wilbur. I'm angry that you got hurt."

"But it wasn't your fault. Phil knows it didn't have anything to do with you," Tommy then stilled at the mention of Phil. "Oh, God, is Phil angry with us?"

"What? Tommy, no. Nobody's angry with you. I'm angry that I didn't stop this *before* you and Wilbur got hurt. I'd been in your exact situation but I just stood by and let it happen to you two and it's not okay." Techno looked away, unable to meet Tommy's eyes. "But if they give you trouble again, uh, come find me. I'll sort them out."

"Thanks," Tommy said and blinked as if mulling over the words like he'd somehow misheard them.

Techno nodded and stood up. He put the rest of the first aid kit away, then headed out onto the landing. Tommy followed him, somehow looking a bit lost as if he wasn't quite sure where to go next.

"Come on, I'll put some dinner on."

"You can cook?"

Techno snorted. "God no, but I know how to use the oven."

Chapter 6

You guys??? Your comments are actually the sweetest thing in the world. I say this non-stop but thank you all so much, I appreciate every one of you!! <33

I'm gonna try to stick with 2 chapters a week but life is a bit hectic atm so I might end up taking me a bit longer to get them out but will defo have at least 1 update a week.

Thanks again to everyone reading this, so happy you're still following my work it means so much to me!!

Despite insisting he could use the oven, Techno still managed to burn the fishfingers.

"I thought you set a timer!" Tommy whined, poking at the charred food with a fork.

"No, I asked *you* to set the timer, while I did the peas."

"Well, I didn't hear you." Tommy crossed his arms and though Techno grumbled, he knew he'd lost the battle.

With a sigh, Techno tipped the tray of fishfingers into the bin.

"What are we gonna do now?"

"We still have the peas."

Tommy stared at him incredulously. "You're kidding."

"You like peas."

"Yeah but not *just peas*, nobody has *just peas*, Techno. Just wait until Phil hears about this, I'll tell him you've *starved* me."

"You're bein' dramatic." Tommy spluttered and Techno turned away to reach for the landline so Tommy wouldn't see the slight smile pulling at his lips. "I'll just order pizza or something."

Techno then tossed a menu in Tommy's direction. It was definitely well-loved, held together with tape and had scribbles in blue pen around the margin detailing Techno and Phil's favourites.

Tommy's eyes roamed over the page for a minute but then he looked up and shrugged.

"I don't care, just get what you want."

Techno sighed. "Tommy, I really don't want to guess what toppings you like. If I don't get an answer I'll just get you margarita and you can watch me eat my Meat Lovers Feast and cry."

"I get my own?"

Techno felt his heart break at the genuine surprise in the kid's voice but forced himself to nod. "Yeah."

Tommy returned his attention to the menu, seemingly spoiled for choice. Sensing Techno was waiting for him, Tommy looked to some of the options which were circled.

"Is ham and mushroom nice?"

"It's alright," Techno shrugged. "It's what Phil usually goes for."

"Yeah, I'll have that one."

Techno nodded and placed their order, ignoring Tommy's shouts of protest when he ordered them each a large.

They sat on the couch while they waited for the pizza to arrive.

Techno had let Tommy pick a movie and he was practically bouncing as he rifled through Phil's assortment of DVDs. He'd eventually settled on Up and while it was one Techno had watched with Phil over and over again, Tommy was relatively new to Disney movies and Techno found it way more fun to watch Tommy's expression change in reaction to the story than follow the plot himself.

When the doorbell rang Tommy jumped.

"Should I pause it?"

"Nah, I'll only be a minute."

When Techno returned, Tommy was just as he had left him, curled up with a couch cushion hugged to his chest as he stared enthralled at the TV.

Techno sat down beside him and passed Tommy's box over to him. The kid whispered his thanks and took a bite of the first slice.

"It's good."

Techno opened his own box and offered it to Tommy.

"Try it," Tommy didn't look too sure. "Trust me, you'll like it."

Tommy reached over and picked up the smallest piece he could find then brought it to his lips. As he bit down Techno saw the way his eyes widened and he chewed quickly, devouring

the piece in record time.

Then, without saying a word, Techno swapped his meal with Tommy's own.

"What are you-"

"You like this one more," Techno began. "Besides, I kind of feel like I want mushroom now."

Tommy smiled genuinely and Techno suddenly felt like it wasn't meant for him. He'd done nothing but harass the kid since he first moved in, he felt guilty, as if he didn't deserve it. It was all a bit too much and he looked away as Tommy turned his attention back to the movie.

Despite Tommy's best efforts to stay awake until the end of the film, he ended up passing out before the credits could roll. He was slumped over, leaning against Techno's side and snoring loudly. Techno pulled the throw from over the back of the couch and draped it over his sleeping body, the kid only stirred to burrow deeper, then relaxed again.

Tommy had managed to finish the entire pizza despite his earlier insistence that he couldn't possibly eat a large. Techno still had a few slices left which he decided he could clingwrap and save for later, though he knew they'd likely end up being offered to Tommy.

Sometime after the DVD had returned to the main menu, Techno felt his phone buzz. He cursed and lifted Tommy up carefully so as to not jostle him too much and wake him up, then Techno slipped out into the hallway to answer the call.

"Hello?" He whispered into the receiver.

"Techno?" He relaxed at the sound of Phil's voice, letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, we're fine. I got Tommy cleaned up and we ordered pizza."

He could hear Phil's smile in his voice. "That's good, does he seem okay?"

"I think he's starting to calm down a bit. He was-" Techno hesitated for a moment, "-he was a bit jumpy at first but we're, um, I think we're good now?"

"I'm glad you two are finally getting along."

"Me too," Techno hummed, then in a bid to deflect the attention from himself, added, "how's Wilbur doing?"

Phil sighed and Techno's heart sank. Suddenly he felt a lot colder than he had a moment ago.

"He's stable, that's what the doctor keeps saying." Phil swallowed and Techno could hear the raw emotion in his voice. "They're keeping him overnight, maybe for a day or two just to make sure he's okay. They think there might be some internal bleeding."

"Oh," Techno's mouth felt dry.

He had never had a Wilbur. He'd never considered the foster kids in his various homes siblings and when Phil had adopted him, it was just the two of them. But despite never having an older brother to have his back, he could see how much Tommy cared about him and he knew that however he moulded and tried to stretch the truth, the kid would know instantly that something was up with his brother.

"Is Tommy there?"

"He's asleep at the minute. We watched Up and he passed out on the couch."

"Right. It's best not to wake him then. He's probably dealt with enough for today."

Techno hummed in agreement and tried to stifle a yawn. Exhaustion had crept up on him too and now he blinked sleepily as he tried to stay awake. Phil seemed to pick up on Techno's unresponsiveness as well and told him to get some sleep; that he'd call tomorrow.

"G'night, Dad."

"Night, Techno."

Techno hung up and made his way back into the living room. Tommy was awake and looking about fearfully with the blanket pulled up to his chin. Tommy then locked eyes on him, his entire body going ridged as his bottom lip trembled.

Techno didn't move, mind reeling and hoping desperately that he hadn't overheard his conversation with Phil.

A beat of silence passed between them, then Tommy relaxed back into the couch, blinking up at Techno sleepily.

"Oh, it's just you."

"It's just me," Techno repeated. "Who else would it be?"

Tommy shrugged, signing contentedly as he closed his eyes again. Sleep slurred his speech as he mumbled into the blanket. "Dunno, didn't know where I was."

A nightmare then, Techno realised, looking back over to make sure the kid was okay but Tommy was already out and sleeping soundly.

Techno debated going upstairs and sleeping in his own bed but decided against it. He grabbed a spare blanket and pillow and lay down on the floor of the living room so that he'd be there if Tommy needed him during the night.

~*~

When Technoblade woke, it was from the ache in his back. He shifted and rolled over, blinking sleepily at the sunlight in his eyes.

It took him a moment to get his bearings then another to remember why he was asleep on the living room floor. Then, like a bolt of lightning to the heart, Techno remembered Tommy.

He sat up and looked around but the kid was nowhere to be seen, only the balled up throw Techno had wrapped the kid in after he fell asleep last night.

Clumsily, Techno got to his feet, jogging out into the hallway. He knew that Tommy was a flight risk – he'd been in the room when his social worker first introduced them. If Tommy had left, it'd be Techno's fault. If Tommy had got hurt, it'd be Techno's fault.

He ran out and started up the stairs, maybe the kid was just in the shower, or had retreated to his room, after all Techno knew that Tommy still wasn't overly keen on him.

He got halfway up the stairs when he heard the sound of something smashing followed by a series of curses. Techno sighed in relief and headed over to the kitchen.

He stepped inside to find Tommy standing frozen in place with shards of ceramic at his feet.

"Mornin'."

Tommy opened and closed his mouth, no words coming out. He looked at the floor, then to Techno as if to check that his foster brother saw the mess.

"I… I dropped a bowl."

"I can see that."

Tommy looked down at his feet, hands coming together in front of him in a white knuckled grip.

"Are you mad?"

"No," Techno shook his head. "I don't care."

"Oh," Tommy looked up nervously, still somewhat wary.

"Stay there, I'll clean it up."

"I can do it!" Tommy protested starting forward.

"What part of 'stay there' don't you understand?" Techno held his hand out to keep Tommy away, his voice came loud but without any real bite to it, fuelled entirely by exasperation. "You're not even wearing socks."

Techno grabbed the broom and started sweeping the shards into a pile before Tommy could stand on them and cut open his foot.

"Neither are you!" The kid crossed his arms and Techno blinked in disbelief. Tommy was *pouting* - acting petulant and stubborn over not being allowed to clean the floor.

"I'm not a child, I know not to step on ceramics."

"Me too!"

"Sure."

"You're just jealous 'cause you know I would have done a better job than you."

Techno snorted and dumped the remains of the bowl into the bin, then headed over to the cupboard Tommy had opened and reached inside, picking up a bowl. He set it on the counter and grabbed another one for himself.

"Try not to break this one."

"Maybe I will, just for fun."

"Well if you do, you're cleaning it up."

Techno snatched the cereal before Tommy could get his hands on it and tipped some into his bowl. Tommy squawked but made no move to fight for it. Techno tried to ignore the way the kid looked genuinely surprised when Techno passed it back and let Tommy fix himself breakfast.

Tommy filled his bowl halfway and then glanced at Techno out of the corner of his eye. There was a moment of silence before Tommy tested the waters and give himself an extra helping. Still, Techno didn't move and seemingly frustrated, Tommy filled the entire bowl to the point where it was nearly overflowing.

Techno knew where this was going and he definitely didn't want to deal with it first thing in the morning. Tommy was pushing him, trying to get a rise out of him so that he'd snap. The bowl incident had clearly riled him up even if he was making out like it didn't, the kid was waiting for a punishment of some kind and seemed intent on getting it over with sooner rather than later.

Unfortunately for him, Techno was unreasonably good at deflection and saw right though him.

Techno had even done something very similar when Phil had first taken him in. He made a mess, refused to take his shoes off at the door and made sure the volume of the TV was turned up as loud as it would go while Phil was taking important phone calls. But despite his best efforts, nothing had worked and over time Techno realised that the guy was just that nice – that he was safe and had nothing to fear from Phil. Tommy, however, was still learning.

"Milk."

Techno placed the milk down beside Tommy and left him be, risking a glance over his shoulder only to see the kid's jaw hanging open in what looked to be confusion and disbelief.

Nearly a minute later, Techno heard the fridge being closed softly, followed by the padding of feet as Tommy emerged in the doorway looking somewhat sheepish, holding his bowl and spoon in one hand and a glass of water in the other.

He took a seat opposite Techno and began shovelling spoonful after spoonful of cereal into his mouth. Tommy kept looking up at Techno, something clearly on his mind but he couldn't quite bring himself to ask.

Then, Techno heard him suck in a deep breath.

"I want to speak to Wilbur."

"What?"

"I want to speak to Wilbur," Tommy looked resolute but still shifted in his chair nervously. "Please." He added hastily.

"Now?"

"Yes."

Techno sighed. "But it's first thing in the morning."

"Actually it's nearly the afternoon, we uh, we slept in."

Techno tensed for a moment before realising that it was Saturday and relaxing back into his seat. Even if it were a school day there's no way he'd let Tommy go after everything he'd been through.

"Okay, fine just let me get a shower and I'll call Phil."

"But Phil said that I was allowed to call whenever I want."

"I know, just give me 10 minutes, I'll be back by the time you finish breakfast."

Tommy grumbled but relented and Techno headed upstairs to have the fastest shower of his life. His hair was still wet by the time he returned to find Tommy chewing his lip nervously.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

Techno nodded and sat beside him, opting to video call Phil so he could convince his dad that Tommy was fine and so that Tommy would be able to see for himself that his brother was still alive.

It rung for a while before the call was answered and Techno didn't breathe until he saw Phil smiling back at him.

"Hello boys! How are you doing?"

"We're good." Techno answered for them both.

"How's Wilbur?" Tommy's voice was relatively level but Techno could feel the way the kid's leg was bouncing up and down nervously beside him.

"He's doing fine," Phil then looked off to the side and Techno faintly heard his voice through the phone speaker. "It's Techno and Tommy asking if you're okay. Do you feel up for a chat?"

There was a small noise that could have been a word, followed by the shifting of blankets.

"I'll pass you onto Wil, he's a bit tired but wants to see you both."

Techno very much doubted that Wilbur wanted to see him but resisted the urge to comment on it as the phone changed hands. There was a momentary blur before the camera settled on Wilbur.

Techno resisted the urge to wince. He had patches of white bandages covering the worst of his wounds and an IV in the back of his left hand. Techno could also make out several smaller wires which ran under his hospital gown and likely hooked up to the blinking machine to one side of Wilbur's bed.

Wilbur didn't look great but he was awake and smiling so Techno figured that had to count as a step in the right direction.

"Don't worry, it looks a lot worse than it actually is." Wilbur's voice was scratchy but soothing, clearly reading the look of horror that crossed Tommy's face.

"You're an idiot," Tommy smiled fondly at the camera and Techno watched Wilbur's eyes soften.

Wilbur opened his mouth but then looked over at Techno and seemed to stop himself. He fixed his eyes on Tommy again, strangely serious.

"How's the weather?"

The question came out of nowhere and was so mundane Techno couldn't help but latch onto it.

"Oh, it's fine. Good, actually."

Tommy hadn't even looked out of the window.

Wilbur frowned. "I thought it'd be overcast, you don't get much sun this time of the year."

"No, no, it's fine. Crystal clear in fact – not a cloud in the sky."

There was something in Tommy's voice that sounded suspiciously like reassurance.

Wilbur hummed. "You sure?"

"Yeah," Tommy replied and that's when Techno caught it. The slight way the kid looked over to him for the briefest of moments. If Techno were to blink he would have missed it, but it was there and all of a sudden everything made sense.

They were talking about him.

Wilbur was asking if Tommy was okay in the most casual way possible and the kid picked up on it instantly. This couldn't have been the first time they'd used the codewords, it came too naturally.

It was clever – *they* were clever, Techno noticed and then felt awful at having dismissed them as the annoying younger kids so quickly. If they had to come up with such a roundabout way of checking in on each other's health, Techno didn't want to think about what they'd gone through in the past. Whatever it was, it was over and Techno wanted to make sure neither of them had to go through anything like it again.

Faintly, Techno could hear Phil excuse himself to grab a cup of coffee and Techno picked up on the fact that he wanted to give his kids some time to chat and work things out.

Techno nudged Tommy on the shoulder gently. "I'm going to check on the garden," then he tried his best to smile at Wilbur in a way that he hoped came across as reassuring, but knew would look somewhat awkward on his face. "Hope you get better soon."

"Thanks…" Wilbur replied, somewhat quiet but still polite.

Techno then stood up to leave so that Tommy and Wilbur could have their privacy. In the end, Techno abandoned the garden in favour of heading to his bedroom, knowing that it'd be way too tempting to stand near the window and listen in to their conversation.

About half an hour after Techno had retreated to his room, he heard a quiet knock on his door.

He stood up and opened it to see Tommy standing there.

"Hullo."

"Hi, um thanks." Tommy held out Techno's phone to him.

"No problem," Techno replied, pocketing it. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, Wil's fine. They found some internal bleeding but it's minor and should sort itself out with enough rest. His ribs are fucked but you, uh, you were right – it was just a sprained wrist."

"That's good," Techno said and then immediately cringed. "Well, not *good*, but I'm happy he's not too bad."

"Yeah," Tommy said with a slight laugh.

Techno stood still in his doorway, Tommy was fidgeting like there was something else bothering him.

"Wilbur also wanted me to give you this," Tommy reached into the pocket of his jeans, hand clenched into a fist. Techno held out his palm and Tommy dropped the small object into it. Techno recognised it instantly. Glistening purple in the dim light of the hallway was his crown keychain. "He also says thanks – from both of us."

Techno's throat felt tight and he coughed to hide the emotion behind his words. "No problem, anytime."

~*~

Truth be told, Techno was surprisingly relaxed about the whole situation. Sure he had an ever-present worry for Wilbur and he missed Phil being around but he was growing to like Tommy more as they spent time together and he wasn't really fazed by being alone. Tommy, on the other hand, seemed to be getting more restless as time dragged on.

He'd only been separated from Wilbur for 2 days but without somebody to bounce off, Tommy seemed run-down and unable to focus on anything but his hospitalised brother.

Techno found him rolling around on the couch, unable to get comfy, while idly flicking through channels on the TV.

"What's wrong?"

Tommy sighed dramatically. "I'm bored."

Techno could see there was more to it than that from the hazy unfocused look in his eyes. The kid was worried sick over Wilbur and needed some sort of distraction but Techno was well-aware that he wasn't much of an entertainer, especially when it came to traumatised kids.

"What do you wanna do?"

Tommy shrugged. "Wilbur usually comes up with something."

Techno knew Tommy didn't intend to hurt him but he felt a slight distance in his words, like he was being pushed away, because he wasn't Wilbur – because he could never be Wilbur and he could never be Tommy's brother. Not in the same way at least.

"What does Wilbur do?"

"He sometimes plays me guitar."

Techno tried not to grimace at the mention of Wilbur's guitar. Techno wasn't musically inclined and definitely had no idea how to even go about playing an instrument – not that

he'd ever risk picking up Wilbur's guitar anyway, he would never forgive himself if he broke it. Even so, it was just another thing Wilbur could do that he could not and the feelings of inadequacy returned tenfold.

He was haunted by Tommy's smile as he danced around the living room with Wilbur, carefree and the happiest Techno had ever seen him. Worse still, Techno feared he'd never have the bond that united them both as brothers. Until recently, Technoblade was happy with being an only child but now, he loathed the fact that he grew up without a sibling by his side.

"I don't know how to play guitar."

"I know," Tommy said, looking away and Techno felt a stab of regret directly through his chest.

He wasn't Wilbur, he could never be Wilbur. Wilbur had been with Tommy for years, they had fended for themselves and developed codewords and had coping mechanisms that Techno couldn't even begin to fathom.

When all was said and done, he couldn't be Wilbur, but he could be Techno.

"Hey Tommy," Tommy looked over, interest piqued. "Do you wanna try fencing?"

The kid's eyes widened and Techno worried for a minute that he'd scared him but the feeling was gone as soon as Tommy grinned and nodded his head with a scary amount of enthusiasm.

They ended up outside, since Techno knew Phil didn't like him using his foil indoors in case he broke anything, besides the garden was a lot more spacious and gave them ample room to move around.

"Here, try these."

Techno had brought his old fencing equipment out of the wardrobe. He'd long since outgrown it but kept it around because it reminded him of the first Christmas he'd spent with Phil. Seeing that Tommy was 12 it shouldn't be too bad of a fit either.

Techno helped fit the mask over Tommy's head, adjusting the strap at the back so that it sat comfortably.

He also zipped up the white jacket even though Tommy could probably figure it out on his own.

Techno had made sure to step into his own equipment too, Phil would kill him if he knew Techno was being unsafe.

"This is your foil," Techno passed Tommy a sword. "You hold it like this, with these fingers on top."

Techno rested the grip in the palm of Tommy's hand, moulding his fingers around so that they were in the right place.

"When you move your sword, don't swing it – in fact, try to move your fingers as little as possible. You can control the entire direction of the point with the way you apply pressure."

Techno placed his hand over Tommy's showing him the correct way to adjust his aim.

"You're trying to hit the trunk of the body, that's basically my white jacket. Don't go for the head, arms or legs, that's kind of a dick move and you'll get in trouble if you were in a real match."

He heard Tommy snort from behind his mask and took that as a sign to continue.

"To hit, you're going to extend your arm, if your opponent is close enough, but if they aren't you'll need to lunge."

Techno backed off and demonstrated to Tommy, the kid copied his actions and let Techno adjust his form.

"Okay, that looks good. Now I'm going to stand in front of you and you can hit me."

Tommy shuffled back slightly. "But what if…"

"What?"

"What if I hurt you?"

Techno smiled but it was hidden behind the helmet. "You won't. See the end of your sword?"

Tommy nodded.

Techno took Tommy's foil from him and brought the tip up for the kid to examine.

"It's got a little bit of rubber called a button. It's a safety thing so in fencing nobody actually hurts each other."

Tommy reached out with a finger, giving it a poke.

"Okay," Techno said, taking up position opposite Tommy. "Try hitting me."

Tommy lunged and Techno let him, the point landed on Techno's chest and the blade arched behind the force of Tommy's arm.

"Well done." Techno could see the way Tommy perked up at the praise. "And look, it didn't hurt."

"Does that mean I get a point?" Techno could hear the smile in Tommy's voice.

"Well it would if we were actually sparring but we're not so it doesn't count."

"But that's not fair! I hit you!"

"You only hit me because I *let* you hit me. I was showing you how to win."

"It still counts." Tommy retorted, stubborn as ever.

"Fine," there was a beat of silence and Tommy blinked in disbelief. "I'll let you have it."

"Really?"

"Yeah, because even with the advantage I'll still win anyway."

Tommy stood en garde and watched as Techno did the same.

The tension in Tommy's body was subtle at first but when Techno took a single step forward and extended his arm, Tommy all but shrieked and recoiled.

Techno dropped his stance immediately, walking over cautiously, sword pointing to the ground.

"Are you okay?"

Tommy nodded his head vigorously. "I'm fine."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No!" Tommy sounded offended.

"Okay but you can't do that."

"It just surprised me!"

Techno counted himself lucky that Tommy couldn't read the blatant distrust on his face.

"Just stand there," Techno shuffled back slightly. "I'm going to hit you. It doesn't hurt, I promise but you've got to trust me."

Tommy stood in position, keeping his body rigid.

Techno extended his arm again and this time Tommy let the button land. The sword bent and Techno held it there for a moment before pulling away.

"Was that okay?"

"It just felt like a poke."

Techno nodded. "That's all it is: a poke with a long stick."

Tommy started forward again. "Stand still, let me poke you."

Techno expertly parried the sword and hit Tommy's chest again, ignoring the irritated squark Tommy gave in response.

They spent the afternoon trading hits in the garden. Techno winning but letting Tommy slip past his defences every now and then so the kid had something he could boast about later.

By the end of the day they were both worn out and laughing as Tommy struggled to free himself of the fencing jacket and mask.

Techno realised that he hadn't had this much fun in a long time and Tommy was grinning again, wide and carefree like when he was with Wilbur.

The day had gone so well, in fact, that Techno nearly let his guard down. When Tommy had crawled to bed exhausted, Techno counted the day pretty much done and went to turn in himself.

He had just switched his computer off when he heard shuffling in the hallway. It was so quiet that he wasn't sure he'd heard anything at all.

Techno fought with himself. He knew he was tired and slightly paranoid and should probably just go to sleep, while the other part of him was restless and refused to settle until it knew that Tommy was safe.

The side in favour of Tommy won out and Techno creeped out of his room, starting down the stairs quietly and stopping in the hallway.

"Where are you going?"

Tommy froze and turned around with one hand on the doorhandle.

"Techno! Shouldn't you be in bed? It's, uh, it's late."

"I could say the same for you."

Tommy laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his neck. "I was just grabbing a glass of water."

Techno looked him up and down. "You're wearing a coat and shoes."

"I was cold?"

There was a lengthy pause between them and then after an uncomfortable staring contest, Techno sighed. "You know I can't let you go, right?"

"Yeah…"

"Where were you heading?"

"I wanted to see Wilbur."

Techno nodded solemnly. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Tommy hung his coat up and kicked off his shoes.

"He should be back in a few days anyway. Phil said the doctors are really happy with him."

"I know. It's just that I'm scared he's lonely and I feel bad because I have you but he's on his own."

Techno's beath caught in his throat. *'I have you'*.

Tommy enjoyed spending time with him. Tommy trusted him. Tommy saw him as family – maybe not quite to the extent he considered Wilbur his family but Techno didn't care.

After a few seconds of trying to find what to say, Techno proceeded in a way he hoped sounded at least somewhat comforting. "Phil's there with him, he's not on his own."

Tommy smiled but it was bittersweet. "I know but I just feel like I should be there. We promised that we'd always be there for each other and I- I don't know, I guess I just feel bad for messing around and having fun while he's stuck in a hospital."

"Wilbur wouldn't want you to be miserable."

"Yeah, you're probably right."

"Come on," Techno nodded towards the stairs. "Get some sleep, he'll be back before you know it."

Chapter 7

When Techno woke up, it was with the sinking realisation that it was Monday.

He left the decision of whether or not they went to school completely up to Tommy. If the kid wanted to stay home, Techno was more than happy to stay with him but if he wanted to go back to school, Techno would make sure nothing happened to him.

Techno also wasn't sure where he stood when it came to beating up several kids on school property but Phil hadn't told him he was suspended so he figured it was likely okay for him to attend.

That said, while there was nothing official in place, Techno didn't doubt for a second that word of his fight had spread like wildfire. Gossip travelled fast, even more so when it involved a handful of violent kids and Philza's infamous problem child.

To his surprise, Tommy opted to go to class. Techno didn't challenge his decision, even if he didn't think the kid was quite ready yet. He was still struggling without having Wilbur around and going back to the place they were both hurt in the first place just didn't seem like a good idea in Techno's book.

But Tommy wanted to go to school so Techno obliged him.

Despite being pretty sure in his decision, the way Tommy shook wasn't lost on him and Techno made sure to sit at his side on the bus and escort Tommy to his first class, glaring at anybody who even dared look in their direction.

People parted around them as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder and from the wary muttering and fearful glances Techno could tell they definitely knew what had went down – or at least the bloody details of it. He didn't really care, his reputation had been built on violence a long time ago, the real message he wanted to get across that Tommy was under his protection and the people who wanted to mess with him would suffer the consequences.

"You don't have to do this, you know?" Tommy whispered to him. "People are staring at us."

"If it makes you feel any better, I think they're staring at me and not you."

"Why would that make me feel better?" Tommy snapped. He wasn't good at whispering on the best of days. Sneaking around in the shadows; maybe but using his indoor-voice; definitely not.

Techno tried not to laugh. At first he found it hard to tell the difference between when Tommy was actually angry and when he was just nervous and lashing out, but now it was clear as day and he wondered how he'd ever found the distinction difficult in the first place.

"Here we are," Techno stopped outside the classroom and Tommy shifted nervously at his side. "Have fun failing maths class."

Tommy stopped chewing his lip and spun around to face Techno. He folded his arms and spoke with an offended tone to his voice. "Who said I was failing maths?"

"Tommy, you do your homework on the kitchen counter, I *know* you're failing maths."

Techno saw the kid's eyes widen a fraction before muttering a series of insults in Techno's general direction.

Techno couldn't help but smile slightly, an irritated Tommy was a lot better than a scared Tommy. Besides, Techno's comments were only light teasing at worst and the indignant look on Tommy's face was just a part of the kid's hyperbolic personality.

After he seemed content that he'd insulted Techno enough, Tommy fixed him with a glare. "You're the worst."

"I know."

Tommy swallowed quickly and added a lot more quietly. "I was just kidding."

"I know."

With that Tommy opened the door and entered the classroom. Techno waited for it to shut completely before beginning to walk to his own lesson, just in case Tommy had forgotten to tell him something or changed his mind and wanted to go home.

It would be a lot easier for Techno to fire him a quick text but neither Tommy or Wilbur showed up with phones and buying one kid a smartphone without much notice was difficult, but having to provide for the both of them was taking Phil a bit of time to get funds together.

So without any way of checking up on Tommy during his classes, Techno couldn't help but worry.

His teachers glanced at him warily like they knew exactly what had happened and feared that he would suddenly spring up and attack them. After fighting tooth and nail to get into their good graces since his initial conflict with Dream, Techno couldn't help but feel particularly

awful that they seemed to revert back to seeing him as nothing more than the problem child. To say it hurt would be an understatement but the feelings of self-pity were overshadowed by a constant worry that Tommy needed help.

Over and over again he told himself that Tommy was in lessons, nobody would even think about hurting him while there was a teacher present but scenarios taunted Techno that he just couldn't shake.

What if Tommy left for the toilet and got jumped? What if kids were stabbing him with sharpened pencils when the teacher wasn't looking? What if they asked him where Wilbur was and the kid had a panic attack then and there?

Techno knew he had to calm down. He wouldn't be able to look after Tommy at all if he got worked up.

The bell for lunch was a blessed relief and Techno all but sprinted out of the classroom, both to find Tommy and to avoid any conversations the teachers may force him into about his recent behaviour and the effects it could have on his future.

The first place Techno checked was Tommy's classroom only to find him not there when he poked his head inside. He ventured down to the lunch hall but the kid was nowhere to be seen among the sea of faces. Techno even checked the back of the school in case the people who hurt him wanted revenge but the only people he could find were the rebellious kids sharing cigarettes.

Techno stepped back inside, walking every hallway and checking for signs of Tommy. In his frantic search he nearly missed the cluster of geography classrooms. They were tucked away in an older hallway which was rather narrow and featured a row of disused lockers. It was relatively quiet when Techno stepped inside, blinking against the sunlight which streamed in through the far window. It was a pretty cosy spot if you didn't mind cramming yourself into a corner and sitting on the floor.

There was soft chatter coming from the far end and Techno approached as quietly as he could. The kids didn't seem to notice him, laughing and joking as he got closer.

Techno felt a great weight lift from his shoulders at the sight.

Tommy was there, unharmed and seemingly happy.

What caught his attention, however, was the kid sat next to him. It wasn't someone Techno recognized and he couldn't help but grow suspicious.

He looked closer to Tommy's age so Techno figured it was likely a kid from one of his classes but the boy's small frame and bright smile wasn't enough to convince him of the kid's innocence just yet. Looks could be deceiving after all.

The kid noticed him first, smile dropping and seeming to shrink back under Techno's glare.

Tommy saw the shift in the kid's demeanour and looked up, seemingly surprised to find Techno standing there.

"Techno! What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you."

"Why?"

Techno wasn't ready to admit to Tommy that he'd spent the entire morning worrying about his wellbeing so he opted to ignore the question entirely.

"Is, uh," Techno looked between Tommy and the boy sat next to him. "Is this kid botherin' you?"

"Huh?" Tommy looked confused for a moment but saw the way the boy beside him swallowed nervously and leapt to action. "No! No, no, no, Tubbo's a friend. A *friend*."

Tommy held a hand out as if trying to placate an aggressive animal and Techno shuffled back, slightly embarrassed.

"Okay, fine I get it, he's a friend – I do understand what the word 'friend' means."

"I should've told you about him sooner but Techno, this is Tubbo, my best friend."

Tubbo seemed to beam at the way Tommy referred to him as his best friend and Techno figured they must be pretty close for Tommy to open up in such a short span of time.

"And this is Techno, my foster brother."

Foster brother. Techno took note of the words. It wasn't that he was unhappy per say, after all he *was* Tommy's foster brother but there wasn't a doubt in Techno's mind that he'd introduced Wilbur without the prefix.

"It's nice to meet you." Tubbo chimed in politely from his spot on the floor next to Tommy and Techno nodded stiffly in return.

"We should go. There'll only be leftovers if we don't get to the lunch hall soon."

"Right," Tommy nodded and pushed himself up, stretching out after being huddled against the lockers for what Techno presumed to be quite a while. "Can Tubbo come too?"

"Sure."

Techno lead them both to the canteen, Tommy and Tubbo bouncing along after him. Whatever nervousness Tubbo felt at first seemed to slip away as he joined in, joking alongside Tommy.

Techno grabbed his lunch first and made for his usual table, smiling slightly as he saw Ranboo waving to him. He sat down opposite his friend and watched Tommy hover

nervously, not quite sure where he fit into the equation.

Tommy eventually decided on a seat beside Techno and glanced up at Ranboo wearily. Techno had no idea how anyone could be intimidated by Ranboo, he was the friendliest person Techno had ever met, aside from Phil, and always went out of his way to make others feel welcome.

"Hi, Techno," Ranboo paused for only a moment as his eyes slid over to where Tommy was sitting somewhat hunched over at Techno's side. "You're Tommy, right? It's great to finally meet you!"

"Um," Tommy looked up, seemingly empowered by Techno's subtle nod in his direction. "Hello…"

"Sorry, I should have introduced myself, I'm Ranboo."

Ranboo smiled and Techno watched as Tommy relaxed, sitting up and seeming to realise that Techno's friend really wasn't all that scary.

"I couldn't find you guys, which shouldn't be all that hard considering-" Tubbo set his tray down on the table then looked up, eyes shining in recognition, and smiled. "Oh, hey Ranboo!"

"I didn't know you were friends with Techno."

"We just met," Tubbo shrugged, sliding around the table to settle down next to Ranboo so that he'd be opposite Tommy. "I met Tommy in maths class back when he first started and he hasn't been able to get rid of me since."

"Maths is the worst." Ranboo added and Tubbo nodded in agreement.

"I thought you liked maths." Tommy blinked at Tubbo in confusion. "You're always going on about chess and stuff."

Tubbo flushed. "I'm not! I just run the chess club, so I maybe sometimes mention it a little bit. Besides, chess is more about analysis than anything else. You'd like it if you just gave it a go."

Tommy wrinkled his nose. "Yeah, no thanks. I'm not into that nerd shit."

"You could go along some time?" Ranboo chimed in hopefully. "The school's kind of awful but the clubs have pretty good funding so you should probably try at least one."

Tubbo sighed dramatically in a way that reminded Techno so much of Tommy. "Nah, Tommy's already pretty set on taking up fencing. I'm fighting a losing battle."

Techno stopped eating and Tommy froze.

Tubbo looked around, slightly panicked by the look of complete and utter betrayal on Tommy's face. "What?"

"*Tubbo*." Tommy groaned, burying his face in his arms on the table. "They weren't supposed to know. I'm still not sure if I want to just yet, I was just thinking about it. *Thinking*!"

"You didn't tell me it was a secret!" Tubbo protested weaky, still looking somewhat guilty even though Tommy seemed more embarrassed than anything else.

Techno felt a pair of eyes on him and looked up to see Ranboo smiling knowingly. He hadn't told Ranboo anything. He couldn't know about him seeing Tommy as his younger brother. Not unless he was a mind reader and Techno was pretty sure that wasn't possible but then again, if anyone had magical powers it'd probably be Ranboo.

Techno looked back to his food in order to dodge his friends eyes, feeling about as embarrassed as Tommy who still had yet to pick his head up off the table.

Though Tommy and Tubbo seemed happy to talk amongst themselves, Ranboo chimed in every now and then before returning his attention to Techno who was pointedly avoiding eye contact.

When Tubbo suggested that they had better start walking to third period, Techno thought he'd gotten away without any sort of confrontation. Tommy and Tubbo had each other so Techno figured he could slip away and make it to class before Ranboo could corner him.

Unfortunately, Ranboo was 3 steps ahead and waiting right around the corner.

"Techno." The tone was slightly chastising and Techno jumped at the sound of his name. He spun around and came face-to-face with Ranboo.

"Could you stop doing that? How do you even manage to get past me? I swear you've gotta be teleporting or something."

"I wouldn't have to if you weren't trying to avoid me."

Techno huffed and walked past him, opting to head straight to class but Ranboo kept up with him easily.

"So, are you going to tell me why you've been ignoring my messages?"

"I've been busy…"

"I can see that." Ranboo swallowed dryly, looking at his feet as he spoke. "I heard about the fight."

Techno hummed, seemingly disinterested but wound his hand into the strap of his school bag and clutched it tightly.

"What, um- what happened?"

"People were hurting Wilbur and Tommy. I just stopped them."

Ranboo was quiet for a moment and Techno risked glancing over at him. His friend's eyes were blown wide with surprise.

"I thought you didn't like them."

"It's complicated." Techno took a moment to swallow his pride and continued. "I was mean. I did stuff that I shouldn't have done and I scared them but I didn't want them to get hurt. I just wanted them *gone*."

"But Tommy…"

"But Tommy." Techno nodded in agreement. "He's not as bad as I thought. Sure he's loud and annoying but it's nice, like the house doesn't feel empty anymore – not that it did before! But now it feels like I notice that it's quiet but before I didn't." Techno stopped himself. "Am I making any sense?"

Ranboo snorted in amusement. "Nah, for an A* English student that was absolutely awful."

Techno huffed and fought back the smile pulling at his lips. "I think I maybe don't want them to go, you know? I'm just worried that if they go somewhere else they'll just be scared all over again."

"That," Ranboo clamped a hand on his shoulder. "Sounds like you're getting attached to them. Maybe – and hear me out here – maybe you're starting to actually care about them."

"Shut up." Techno shrugged him off.

"I mean it. You're even sitting with Tommy at lunch! The kid wants to take up *fencing* – I wonder if there's anyone else who does fencing that might have inspired him just a bit? An older brother figure, perhaps?"

"You're the worst." Techno muttered but Ranboo wasn't listening.

"Wait…" The colour had drained from Ranboo's face. "If you're sitting with Tommy, then what happened to Wilbur?"

Techno ignored him, his classroom was just up ahead, another half a minute and he'd be there.

"*Techno,*" Ranboo insisted more firmly. "Where is he?"

Techno swallowed thickly. "Hospital."

"The hospital," Ranboo echoed, his eyes wide and filled with worry. Techno saw his whole demeanour shift in front of him, the way his body sank and jaw fell open, lip quivering slightly as he looked at Techno with a kind of sympathy he'd never seen before. "I didn't know. I'm so sorry, I had no idea. Tommy's probably – oh, God, *Tommy*."

"He's okay." Techno assured him quickly. "Well, as good as you can be I guess. We've, uh, been getting along and Wilbur's getting better. Phil's staying with him, so he's not on his own

and I can look after myself for a few days."

"Well yeah but can you handle looking after a kid?"

"Tommy's fine, he's not a toddler. Besides, Phil says Wilbur should be out tomorrow if the doctors clear him."

"Right, that's good I guess but I didn't know it was that bad." Ranboo nodded, then he hesitated and looked at Techno with a heaviness in his eyes. "Did you hurt them?"

It took Techno a moment to realise Ranboo was asking about the kids attacking Tommy and Wilbur. For a second, Techno felt his heart pound in his ears, felt the rush of blood and burst of adrenaline but forced himself into composure.

"Yeah."

Ranboo nodded once, satisfied. "Good."

Techno stopped outside the door to his classroom. He felt too awkward to go in with Ranboo still lingering at his side.

"Sorry I didn't reply to your messages…"

"What? Techno it's fine, you had other things going on but you know you can talk to me, right? If you're upset and stuff."

"Yeah, thanks."

Ranboo smiled at him again and it felt genuine, in the same way Tommy had smiled after their first unofficial fencing lesson.

Techno then turned, heading into the classroom.

The rest of the afternoon passed with Techno not paying much attention to anything. His teachers avoided asking him questions, even when the other students were silent and it was painfully obvious that he knew the answers.

Time crawled along slowly until at last the final bell rung and Techno made his way to the front of the school where Tommy was already waiting for him.

The kid leapt toward him while shouting his name which took Techno so completely by surprise that he nearly lost his footing and toppled over. Fortunately, he managed to right himself before he could hit the ground.

He pretended to be annoyed as he dragged Tommy over to the school bus so that they could finally get home, the kid whining all the way just to cause as much inconvenience as he could. By the time they were situated in the back of the bus, Tommy's face broke into a grin and Techno couldn't help but resign himself to the fact that dealing with the kid was just his life now.

When they got home the first thing Tommy did was complain that there was no food in. Begrudgingly, Techno realised that he was right. There were some vegetables that looked like they were very quickly nearing their expiration date and they'd already used up all the bread for toast and sandwiches.

"I can probably make us something."

"Please don't make me eat your cooking."

"You think I want to eat it either?" Techno looked over his shoulder at Tommy who was rummaging around in the cupboards while he scoured the fridge. "We've just gotta make do with what we've got. I can do baked potatoes."

"Don't you fucking dare."

"They're good."

"They aren't!" Tommy slammed the cupboard shut a lot louder than necessary to get the point across, before falling against the breakfast bar and sulking. "Can't we just order in?"

"Again? I'm not that rich, I can't keep buying food."

"Come on, just for one more night. I can help." Tommy reached into his pocket, pulling out a wad of carefully folded notes, the £10 on top had a familiar looking 'X' creased into it but Techno abruptly looked away as Tommy continued. "If Wilbur and Phil aren't back tomorrow I'll eat your stupid baked potatoes."

"…And you won't complain about it?"

"Oh, I'll definitely complain about it."

Techno was quiet for a moment then sighed. "Fine."

"Yes!" Tommy jumped up as Techno gave in and reached for his phone to place their order.

They ended up waiting for their order to arrive on the couch. Techno curled up in the corner with the TV remote, flicking through channels so he could find something they would both deem interesting. Tommy on the other hand, wasn't quite so happy with that fact.

"Come on!" Tommy made a grab for the remote. "It's not fair, we got to watch what you suggested last time!"

"*Actually*, you picked the movie so it's technically my turn."

"But you agreed with it so it doesn't count."

"What?" Techno moved just in time to dodge Tommy's hands. "We should just agree on something anyway, that way we'll both enjoy it."

"Okay, then pass me the remote so I can find something we'll both enjoy."

"Or I could just do it."

"Well, I want to so I'm taking it."

Tommy clambered over him, bony knees poking into his side as the kid stretched over him, one hand braced against Techno's shoulder as he reached for the remote once again.

Techno huffed under the weight.

When Tommy warmed up to somebody he was surprisingly tactile, always touching or grabbing or knocking shoulders – not in an unfriendly way, more to prove that he was there. Techno thought that maybe it was some way to ground himself, to reassure some part of his mind that he had people around him and they weren't going anywhere. Or maybe Techno was reading too much into it and the kid was just clingy.

They both jumped at the sound of a bang.

Techno twisted his head at an awkward angle so that he could see what had happened. He heard Tommy gasp and then he registered the noise as the front door closing.

Phil was smiling over at them gently with a tenderness that made Techno want to run away and hide in his room to escape the awful mushy feeling in his chest.

"Good to see you two have been getting along."

Techno nodded mutely, sneaking a glance at Tommy who had yet to move. He seemed to be searching for something and then from behind Phil, Wilbur shuffled forward.

He still had areas of his body which were covered in white bandages with a compression bandage wrapped around his left wrist, but he was up and moving and looking considerably better than when Techno had last seen him during their video call a few days prior.

Wilbur was, however, staring at them in shock, like he had just walked in on Tommy poking a sleeping lion with a stick. He seemed caught whether to intervene or just watch it happen.

Fortunately, Tommy didn't make him choose, tumbling off Techno and making straight for his brother. "Wil!"

Wilbur blinked the surprise off his face, smiling down at Tommy who reached out to him but then stopped short like he would do more damage if he were to try hugging him just yet.

Wilbur rolled his eyes and pulled Tommy against his chest anyway and a second later, Tommy wrapped his arms around Wilbur's back, clutching to his shirt like his life depended on it. Techno watched them for a few seconds but noticed the way Tommy's shoulders shook and his breathing grew gasping and uneven. He stood quietly and snook out the door.

As much as he wanted to stay and make sure Wilbur had made a full recovery, he recognized that the moment wasn't his - it was Tommy and Wilbur's and they both deserved some privacy.

He found Phil in the kitchen, who was in the process of tossing out the vegetables Techno noticed earlier.

Techno lingered in the door, rocking from one foot to the other and staring down at his socks. "Hey," he began quietly.

"Techno," Phil abandoned what he was doing to close the distance between them and pull Techno in for a hug. Techno wrapped his arms around Phil's back and clung to him tightly in a way that was likely crushing his lungs but Phil was too nice to mention it.

"Techno," Phil began again. "I am so proud of you."

He tried to fight back the tears that burned his eyes but Phil was repeating his words over and over again until eventually Techno couldn't hold back, crying quietly into his dad's shoulder. Phil shushed him, rubbing circles into his back and rocking them gently.

"You did so well looking after Tommy, I know it wasn't easy for you and it wasn't fair for me to put all that responsibility on you and I'm so sorry."

Techno sniffled, voice hoarse. "It's fine."

"No, it isn't, I should have called a friend over to watch you two, or had you stay with Ranboo and his family for a few nights. Techno there's not even much in the fridge, I should have done better."

"We're fine, really."

Phil sighed but let Techno pull away to quicky wipe at his eyes. "Okay but I *am* sorry. I should have talked to you about taking on Wilbur too, I knew you were going to have trouble with another kid in the house as it is."

"It's not that bad, I guess…" Techno had returned to looking at his feet, fiddling with the sleeve of his shirt. "I wasn't very nice to them at first but they're, uh, they're okay."

"That's good to hear." Phil said and smiled at him, Techno looked up and managed his own in return.

There was sound coming from the living room and Techno turned realising that Tommy and Wilbur were likely done having their moment and would probably be venturing out to find where he and Phil had wandered off to.

Techno quickly made for the stairs in the hopes of shutting himself in the bathroom to wash his face and disguise some of the puffiness around his eyes. It wasn't that he was ashamed of crying, more embarrassed than anything else and now that Tommy didn't seem scared of him, Techno knew that teasing wouldn't be off the table.

With one foot on the stairs, Techno heard the sound of the doorbell ring out and echo off the walls. Phil wandered out, shooting a questioning look at Techno.

"Tommy and I ordered Chinese food."

"You what?" Phil blinked at him but Techno had already ran the rest of the way to the bathroom.

By the time Techno had finished washing his face and was absolutely sure he wasn't going to burst into tears again, he made his way back downstairs to find Tommy and Phil in the kitchen trying to figure out how to split the food among 4 people instead of 2.

"Great, now Techno's back we have to give him some too."

"You weren't going to give me any?"

Tommy shrugged. "You weren't here."

"I *literally* ordered it," Techno commented, exasperated already as he made to pick up his plate.

Phil swatted his hands away. "Hang on, I'm not done dividing it up yet."

Techno sighed and Phil waved dismissively. "Go wait in the living room, I'll give you a shout when it's done."

"Fine," Techno said dryly, then turned to Tommy. "You," he pointed a finger in the kid's direction. "Don't eat my food."

"I can't promise that."

Techno glared at him without any malice behind it as he shuffled to the living room.

He went to flop down onto he couch only to freeze upon seeing Wilbur, sat very still and quiet in the opposite corner.

"Hi," Techno began awkwardly as if anything too loud would startle the boy and send him running.

"Hello," Wilbur smiled politely but Techno could tell that it didn't reach his eyes. Even being in the same room as Techno seemed to make Wilbur uneasy.

Techno wanted to make an excuse and back away but that would just be rude, so he shuffled closer and sat down leaving as much space between him and Wilbur as he could. Once glance in his direction revealed that Wilbur was trying his best not to look at him and Techno wasn't sure if Wilbur was angry with him or still nervous.

"I looked after Tommy while you weren't here," Wilbur spun around staring at him wide-eyed. Well, Techno figured, that was certainly one way to get the guy's attention. "He was fine, he hung around with Tubbo a lot at school and he had lunch with me and Ranboo – nobody bothered him and he seemed okay. We also had pizza and did a bit of fencing which I think he liked…"

Wilbur swallowed and nodded. "Yeah, he mentioned that."

Techno could feel himself fidgeting in the awkward silence between them. He'd thought it would be easier to talk to Wilbur but just couldn't find the words to say – had no idea where to even begin with apologising for how he'd acted when the foster kids had first moved in. Looking back on things, he couldn't quite believe it that he'd actually somewhat befriended Tommy *first*.

There was a few seconds of silence until Wilbur spoke again, very quietly and with a fragility to his voice like he was about to break down all over again. "Thank you."

"No problem, he's a good kid. No trouble at all."

Wilbur huffed, smiling.

"Well, maybe a *little* bit of trouble but he's worth it."

"Yeah, he is." Wilbur fidgeted with the hem of his jumper for a moment before looking up. "He likes you, you know?"

"I think he's more scared of me than anything else."

"Maybe at first but not now." Wilbur shook his head. "We were scared of Phil at first too."

"You're not scared of him now?"

"No. He was really nice from the minute we got here and we weren't sure how long it was going to last but I was absolutely terrified in hospital. I didn't know where I was or if Tommy was safe and I had a lot of trouble sleeping. Phil was always there when I woke up and he wasn't mad or angry with me when I couldn't sleep even though it kept him awake too.

"I thought for sure that he would at least be angry about the fight but he wasn't. I got scared thinking that maybe he thought it was Tommy's fault and he was getting punished for it instead of me but Phil just told me over and over that he wasn't angry with us – like *at all*. It was so weird."

Techno laughed. "That's Phil for you. I used to get in trouble weekly and even though the school said it was my fault, Phil was the only one who stuck up for me."

"I'm sorry. I know you don't love having us here, I can't imagine it's easy when you're his kid and these two strangers just show up and make themselves your problem."

"No," Techno bowed his head, pushing the buttons on the TV remote so that he wouldn't have to look at Wilbur. "It wasn't fair, I'd been in the same place as you two and I knew how hard it is coming to a new house and I wasn't helping, so yeah I'm sorry and stuff.

"Also, for the record, I don't hate you – either of you. I actually don't mind having you both around. It's nice, the house is too quiet when it's just me and Phil."

"Well thanks, for everything but especially watching out for Tommy while I wasn't around."

"It's no problem."

"Still, if there's anything I can do-"

"No."

"But-"

"No, this isn't- I wasn't looking for anything in return. I protected Tommy because I didn't want him to get hurt again, I'll look out for you as well. I don't want either of you to go through that again."

"Why?"

Techno fought back the whine in his throat, he didn't like talking about his feelings. This whole conversation was torture, as necessary as it may be. He glanced over at Wilbur, only to feel sick when the boy looked genuinely confused.

"Because I care about you both?"

He hoped it was enough. It was probably too forward to start talking about familial bond and brotherhood just yet so he hoped that his words sounded convincing enough.

Wilbur just gaped at him and Techno genuinely worried that he had stopped breathing for a moment. Fortunately, Tommy came running into the room ruining any sort of sentimentality, which Techno was extremely grateful for. He was balancing a plate in each hand and trying hard not to spill the food sitting on top.

"Phil and I have made the execative-"

"*Executive*."

"-Executive decision that Techno gets his last-"

"Wait, what?"

"Techno don't interrupt." Tommy kept enough distance so that Techno couldn't swipe it from him as he walked past. "Wil, here you go and this one's mine."

"How is that fair?"

"It's not." Tommy was smug as he flopped down onto the couch, leaning against Wilbur's side.

"And what's gonna stop me from taking that one?" Techno asked flatly.

Techno had no intention of stealing the plate from Tommy but it didn't take a genius to tell the kid had issues with food in the past. Especially if Tommy's hoarding situation was anything to go off. He hoped that his tone was monotone enough to make it clear that there was no threat at all, that Tommy had nothing to worry about but after years of abuse and neglect it was a dangerous move.

Tommy blinked at him vacantly and Techno was ready with an apology on his lips but before he could even get a word out Tommy burst into laughter.

"You think you can take me, big man?" Tommy lightly nudged his brother. "Hey Wil, this guy actually thinks he can take me. Just wait until I start stabbing shit."

"This is why you don't give children knives."

"I am *not* a child."

"Sure," Techno didn't even try to hide the amusement in his voice.

"Oh my God, here," Tommy plucked a singular spring roll off his plate stuffing it into Techno's mouth. "Eat that and shut up."

It was hard to swallow while fighting back laughter but Techno managed and looked back over to Tommy. Wilbur was eying the kid curiously and it was with a sudden realisation that Tommy was *sharing* his food – and he didn't even seem that fazed by it.

"Sorry about the wait."

Before Techno could think too hard about it Phil had appeared and passed him a plate. Techno instinctively moved up so that Phil had just enough room to squeeze on the end of the couch. It had never been this cramped before but Techno decided that he didn't really mind all that much if it was his family.

"What are you boys wanting to watch?" Phil asked turning to them.

"Something good." Techno responded dryly, too busy getting food into his mouth.

"I don't mind," Wilbur piped up, looking to the others to make the choice, polite as ever.

Tommy bolted upright so suddenly that Wilbur flinched. "We should watch Up!"

Techno groaned. "Not again…"

"You *like* Up."

"Yeah but we literally saw it the other day, choose something else."

"Wilbur hasn't seen Up, have you?"

"I, um, no? I don't think so."

"It's settled then."

"No, it isn't."

Ultimately, Phil intervened and manged to get them to compromise with Toy Story. It was something Wilbur and Tommy hadn't seen while in keeping with their current theme of Pixar films but it was also Techno's favourite, even if he tried to deny it.

It was a strangely domestic night. Wilbur and Tommy couldn't take their eyes away from the screen. Techno even caught Wilbur trying to hum along to the music at one point despite having never heard it in full before.

It was sad to think that there were so many things Techno remembered from growing up with Phil that Wilbur and Tommy had never experienced, but it only made him more resolute to make sure they worked even harder to catch them up now that they were here.

Techno finished his food, saving one single spring roll and if it somehow made its way onto Tommy's plate when no one was looking, then nobody had to know.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

We're all just going to pretend I got this chapter out on time XD

I'm so sick of looking at this one but need to get it out of the way so we can begin to tie up some loose ends at long last, so here it is!!

As always, thank you all so much for the support. I always appreciate the people who leave comments/kudos, bookmark this fic and take the time to read it, it means the world to me!! :D

"Hey, Wilbur?"

"Hmm?" Wilbur looked over at Phil, sleeves rolled up to his elbows with his good hand submerged in the kitchen sink, scrubbing away at the dishes. It was Tommy's job while Wilbur was still healing up but the kid had vanished.

He had been helping out at one point but had gotten bored and escaped when no one was looking, leaving Techno to dry and put away the dishes left on the draining board as Wilbur washed them clean.

They didn't really mind too much, it was Tommy at the end of the day and they both had a soft spot for the kid, which gave him way more leeway when it came to getting away with not doing his chores.

"I need to chat with you about something…" Phil stood in the doorway looking reluctant, his voice trailing off like he was about to say something he knew the kid would definitely not want to hear. "I've just been on the phone with your social worker-"

The plate Wilbur was holding clattered into the basin, cushioned by the running water and bubbles but the noise was still loud and seemed to startle him into jumping backwards.

"Sorry, sorry."

"It's okay, don't worry. You're absolutely fine," Phil started forward slowly and Wilbur nodded as if trying to take the words in and believe them. "She wants to pop round and have a chat with you at some point about, um, what happened. If that's alright?"

Wilbur swallowed loudly, curling in on himself and using his good hand to pull at the hem of his jumper. "Am I-" He took a deep breath before continuing very quietly. "Have I done something?"

"No!" Phil was quick to assure him. "No, not at all. You haven't done anything wrong, Wil, they're just a bit worried about you is all. If you're not comfortable, I can ask to postpone."

"No," Wilbur shook his head but the action was jerky, like he was fighting against the urge to freeze up. "I'll- it's okay."

"As long as you're sure?"

"I- yeah I am."

Wilbur didn't sound sure. Even when Phil had left and it was just the two of them, Wilbur didn't move. He just stared in front of him, unseeing and tense as water dripped from his fingertips and collected on the tiled floor.

"Hey," Techno called out to him as softly as he could. "I'll handle this, okay?"

Wilbur blinked himself back to reality and looked over, noticing Techno moving closer to the sink.

"No, it's okay, really, I can-"

Techno gently pushed him away, stuffing a tea towel in his hands.

"You look tired," it wasn't a complete lie, Wilbur *did* look exhausted. "Get some rest."

Wilbur appeared ready to fight him on it but after a pointed look from Techno, he relented. He nodded and dried his hands leaving the tea towel on the counter once satisfied.

"Thanks." He muttered quietly on his way to the door, smiling softly over at him, still somewhat nervous but genuine all the same.

"Anytime."

It was an open secret that Wilbur had spent the following nights camping out in Tommy's room, restless in his own company and especially so at night when the house was quiet and dark and Wilbur was left alone with his thoughts. It seemed that the thought of speaking to his social worker had riled him up more than he cared to admit.

Every night, Techno heard Wilbur's door creak open and close gently, followed by tired whispers before the quiet returned.

Neither Techno, nor Phil mentioned it the following morning and though Phil had tried to talk to Wilbur about his anxiety, the kid wasn't having any of it. Dismissive and reassuring, Wilbur would promise Phil he was absolutely fine despite overwhelming signs he was not.

When the day arrived for Wilbur's social worker to actually show up, Techno found him pacing the landing.

"Mornin'," Wilbur jolted at the sound of Techno's voice but seemed to calm down slightly at the sight of him. "You, uh, doing okay?"

"She's downstairs…" Wilbur whispered, chewing on the inside of his mouth as he rocked back and forth on his feet.

"Ah, do you want me to go down with you?"

Wilbur looked surprised for a moment, then he nodded, not quite making eye contact. "Yes, please."

"Do you wanna wait for Tommy?"

"No," Wilbur shook his head. "He's not- he'll- I don't think he's really, um, *good* in these sorts of situations."

"Okay, let's go?"

He didn't get a reply but started down the stairs anyway and Wilbur followed closely behind. It must have looked slightly ridiculous to see someone as tall as Wilbur hiding behind Techno of all people, but if it made him feel even marginally safer, Techno didn't mind in the slightest.

"Morning boys!" Phil smiled over to them from the kitchen, where he'd made a coffee for both himself and the social worker.

"Hello Wilbur," She said politely with a smile and though Wilbur shrunk back, he managed his own in return.

"Hi…"

"We're just going to have a little chat for a bit, if that's okay?"

Wilbur peeked over Techno's shoulder and nodded curtly.

"Great," she turned to Phil. "Do you have a room we could use?"

"Of course," Phil lead them towards his office and Wilbur hesitated when stepping inside. He cast a mournful glace over at Techno before the door shut behind him.

Techno turned to Phil. "Can't I go in with him?"

"Ah, sorry, mate. His social worker needs to speak to him on his own, just to make sure he's not being- er, how do I put it?" Phil hummed to himself. "I guess so they know he's not being told what to say."

"We wouldn't do that." Techno protested, offended by the idea and Phil laughed gently.

"I know but it's procedure. It's a load of bullshit at times but at the end of the day it's to make sure he's safe."

Techno grit his teeth but came away from the door. "Fine."

"C'mon, grab some breakfast, he'll be done before you know it."

"But he's *scared*."

"I know," Phil sighed. "I know but we can get into a lot of trouble if they think Wilbur got hurt because of us.

"Because of *what*?" Techno couldn't help the way his jaw fell open in shock. "They think *we* did that?"

Techno had been in his fair share of abusive homes. He knew what it was like to have to fight over scraps at meal time and guard your precious few belongings lest they get stolen while you slept. Phil was so far from that hell the very notion felt insulting.

"No, no, no! They're just checking he's safe. It's all procedure – nothing to worry about!"

It did little to put Techno at ease. He sat rigid in his chair, ears straining for any nose that Wilbur was upset, ready to burst in there (procedure be damned) if he'd heard any.

"What's your problem?"

Techno looked up to see Tommy, still half asleep and making for the cereal.

"Nothin'."

"He's fine," Phil added, handing Tommy the milk. "I think you might have to go in after Wil, if that's okay?" Phil kept his voice careful and light, very aware that Techno was sitting within earshot.

Tommy blinked for a moment in confusion, then looked around and noticed Wilbur missing. He tensed but agreed, though it was followed by irritated mutterings under his breath.

Wilbur was gone for nearly 45 minutes and when he reappeared, he looked drained. Tommy was ushered into the room soon after and Wilbur collapsed into a seat at the dining room table, arms folded on top and head buried in the crook of his elbow.

Phil had Wilbur's breakfast already prepped and set it down in front of him gently. "You feeling okay?"

Wilbur looked up, blinking tiredly. "Yeah," his voice sounded hoarse. "I'm fine."

"How was it?" Techno cut in as Wilbur reached out for his bowl, drawing it closer.

"Fine, I guess. She talked a lot."

"Oh," Techno wasn't quite sure what to say. Questions raced through his mind but he fought the urge to ask. It wouldn't be right, especially since Wilbur looked like he didn't want to even think about the whole ordeal.

In the end, Wilbur only managed to get through about half of his cereal before giving up and pushing it away. Both Techno and Wilbur let the silence sit between them, Wilbur seemed deep in thought and Techno suspected he was happy enough just to be left alone for a while instead of being forced into stressful conversation.

Tommy was out of Phil's office in considerably less time, though scowled as he sat down next to his brother, glaring up at the social worker and Techno figured it had probably gone less smoothly than Wilbur's session.

"All good?" Phil asked, emerging from the kitchen. He looked first to Tommy, then up at the social worker when he didn't get an answer.

"Yes, I think so. Would I be able to borrow you for a moment, I won't take up much more of your time, I promise."

"No problem at all," Phil smiled but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'll be right back boys."

He didn't get much of a response except Tommy nodding as he reached out for Wilbur's bowl and finished it himself.

They were being quiet and for a second Techno worried that they were waiting for him to leave, but as soon as they heard the sound of Phil's office door being shut, Tommy erupted.

"Why the fuck are they talking to us now?"

Wilbur shrugged. "I don't know."

"Where were they when we were being starved, or fucking *hit*. Or, I don't know, maybe go and bother the family of the sick fucks who jumped us in the first place!"

Techno felt his heart stop. He had an idea of what kind of shit Wilbur and Tommy had gone through in the past but to hear it straight from Tommy himself struck Techno and left him speechless. He couldn't move, couldn't think through the red haze behind his eyes.

It was Wilbur who snapped him out of it, looking at Tommy sadly and stumbling over his words. "I- I don't know, Tommy."

"It's not fucking fair."

Tommy sat back in his seat, arms folded across his chest and empty bowl abandoned on the table.

"No, it's not."

"What happens now?" Tommy cast a nervous glance towards Wilbur, who looked equally as lost.

"I think we-" Wilbur clamped his mouth shut at the sound of Phil's office door swinging open. Phil could be heard chatting to the social worker though they didn't enter the kitchen

straight away. Phil was showing her around, from room to room, if Techno's fleeting glimpses of them were anything to go off.

Wilbur said nothing the whole time and Tommy kept quiet beside him.

Eventually, she reappeared in the kitchen and bid goodbye to Tommy and Wilbur but not before passing each of them her number in case they needed her help. Tommy snarled and looked ready to unleash hell upon her but Phil had her quickly out the door before the kid could pounce.

When he shut it, he seemed just as tired as Wilbur but also, deeply, unrefutably, pissed off.

"What was all that about?" Techno tried to ask casually, as he gathered the dishes and moved them to the sink.

"She wanted another house inspection to make sure there was no way for Tommy and Wilbur to hurt themselves."

"But you passed the initial approval process."

"Yeah."

"Then why-"

"I told her it wasn't you!" Wilbur rushed out and it took Techno's brain a minute to catch up with what he'd said. "I- it happened at school but I don't think-"

"Wil, it's okay mate, nobody's accusing anybody of anything. She was just doing her job but it doesn't half piss me off when they don't listen to a word I say. She was just trying to keep you guys safe and wanted to make sure you were okay at home, that's all."

Wilbur nodded stiffly but didn't look convinced. Ultimately, it was Techno who broke the silence.

"Are they going to do anything about the school?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well they want to keep Wilbur and Tommy safe, right? Then, why not go where they were *actually* hurt them in the first place?"

"That," Phil laughed bitterly, "is a great question. She did say that she'd in in touch with the school as well, so hopefully we'll hear from her soon."

Techno huffed but dropped it, turning away.

"Is she coming back?"

Phil looked at Wilbur, eyebrows knit together in confusion. "Not unless you need her to. Is there something you wanted to say?"

"No! I just, I thought- well, we just- we're in trouble, aren't we?"

"Why on earth would you be in trouble?"

"The, um, the hospital?"

"Wilbur, neither you or Tommy are in trouble, what happened to you both was awful and I'm going to make sure you never have to go through it again, okay?"

Wilbur looked taken aback, even Tommy seemed as though he was struggling to quite believe it, but then Wilbur took a deep breath and spoke with as much confidence as he could muster.

"Okay."

~*~

In the days that followed, there was no fighting, the foster kids were nice company and Phil had perked up considerably. After the constant state of jealousy and anger and paranoia of the weeks prior, just being able to sit around doing nothing was a welcome respite.

The sun was beginning to set as winter cut the days down considerably but Phil kept the house cosy and warm. Techno knew that as soon as December hit, he'd have a box of Christmas decorations down from the attic and be pushing Techno to help him decorate the tree. Maybe this year Tommy and Wilbur would help.

Techno started at the thought.

Would the brothers still be around for Christmas? Had they even had a proper Christmas before? Techno hadn't until Phil took him in. It was also the same day Phil had offered to adopt him all those years ago. Would Phil adopt Wilbur and Tommy too?

He padded down the stairs clumsily, already drowsy and sleepy from the fire Phil lit in the hearth an hour prior.

Did Techno want Wilbur and Tommy to stay? On one hand, that sort of commitment was terrifying but on the other, Techno began to dread the day Wilbur and Tommy would have to move on – if some other family came along and wanted to adopt them, or heaven forbid, adopt only one of them.

Techno made it to the hallway, rounding the corner he looked up to see Wilbur standing there.

"Hey."

Wilbur jumped but calmed down upon realising it was only Techno.

"Hi."

Wilbur didn't move, still fixated with something on the wall. Techno walked closer, standing at his side and looking up. It was a photo he took with Phil last summer.

Phil had managed to get some time off and they went camping together for a long weekend. At first Phil thought it'd be too much for a kid who spent most of this time hiding away in his room but Techno had proven himself to be more than capable. He was quite the survivalist when put to the test and Phil insisted he was so proud.

The picture had been taken after Techno had caught his first fish. He'd already thrown it back but Phil wanted a picture of him anyways. They were both still excited, definitely tired too but there was the wonderful sense of fun that came with being with your family out in the open.

"Your hair…"

"Hmm," Techno looked at the picture again. "Oh yeah, I dyed it pink during the summer holidays – well Phil dyed it. I just picked the colour."

"It looked nice."

Techno blinked in surprise. "Thanks."

Wilbur looked at him, eyes focused, concentrating hard as he looked him up and down, then turned to scrutinize the picture again.

For some reason Techno didn't feel irritated by the way Wilbur was looking at the pictures. Sure, when Wilbur first arrived it was something that really bothered him but now he was just somewhat indifferent.

"You should dye it again."

"Maybe in the summer."

Wilbur frowned. "Why not now?"

"Because it's against the school dress code."

"Well that's stupid," Wilbur seemed genuinely upset. "You should do it anyway."

"Why?"

"You seemed happier," Wilbur said shrugging. "And it suits you."

"I might talk to Phil about it."

"You should. Besides, what's school really going to do about it? You can just kick their asses."

"Ah yes, let me proceed to beat the shit out of the entire board of education."

"Well it wouldn't be undeserved."

"Don't tempt me, I'll actually consider it."

Wilbur laughed and stepped to one side so he could move past Techno and head upstairs.

"You making dinner?"

"No."

"Thank God."

"You haven't even tried my cooking!"

"Tommy said it was bad."

"Of course he would, he's Tommy!"

Wilbur tried to hide his laughter behind his hand but Techno had already turned away and huffed dramatically.

"Well, it looks like we aren't friends."

"Fine."

Techno got to the living room but glanced one last time over at Wilbur, ever paranoid that he wouldn't pick up on the teasing lilt to his voice and actually wind up upset.

"See you at dinner?"

"6 o'clock." Wilbur said in return and Techno bobbed his head before turning and heading into the living room.

As soon as he stepped inside his heart dropped.

"Phil?"

"Techno! Hi…"

Phil was sat on the couch, with the newspaper set down beside him. In his hands were the brightly coloured university leaflets Techno had forgotten all about since first bringing them home.

"Are these yours?"

Techno hung his head, letting the longer strands of hair fall over his face. He could feel the heat in his cheeks, knew he looked ridiculous but he wasn't sure if he was ready to hear whatever Phil was about to say.

"Come here," Phil said, sighing softly and when Techno risked glancing up he saw his Dad's fond smile and shuffled over to sit beside him. "When did all this happen?"

"I, um, I had a bit of a talk with- with Miss Thompson a while ago. She said I might be looking at a scholarship."

"Techno that's incredible!" Phil's face was completely lit up and Techno couldn't resist smiling too. "I'm so, so proud of you. I knew you could. You always work so hard and I just want you to know that whatever you want to do, I'll always support you – *always*."

"Thanks…" Techno muttered shyly, still slightly overwhelmed.

"Is university something you want to look into? I mean this looks amazing but it has to be something you want to do, make sure you aren't just doing it because you feel like you have to."

"I… I think I want to. Can I think about it?"

"Of course you can. We can have a look together at some point and see if they can get us on a few campus tours. You've still got plenty of time so don't worry just yet, okay? We'll sort it out."

Techno nodded but there was still one thought that haunted him. He didn't want to ruin the moment but it was persistent and made him feel slightly nervous about the whole situation.

"What's wrong?"

Screw Phil. Screw Phil and Ranboo and their magical psychic abilities.

"It's nothing…"

"It doesn't sound like nothing."

"It's just that- the fight. What happens now? Does the school know?"

Phil sighed settling against the plush back of the couch, suddenly looking very tired and Techno wondered if he said the wrong thing.

"Yeah, yeah they know. They weren't too happy about it but I played hell with them for accusing you of starting anything. I know they like to blame you for these sorts of things but if you hadn't stepped in when you did, Wilbur would probably be a lot worse off – Tommy too."

"Oh…"

"I'm not condoning violence," Phil added quickly. "But I'm proud of you for looking out for your family. I know having Wilbur and Tommy around has been hard on you."

Techno was quiet for a moment, Phil's words were loud in his head playing over and over again. He had said *family*.

Techno coughed to change the subject. "What about my record."

"It should be left alone. I mean, if the parents of the other kids want a legal battle they might push for it but I don't think that would happen. As far as I know Wilbur was the only one who had severe injuries so I don't think they'd have any ground to stand on. It's awful to say but if Wilbur wasn't as badly hurt as he was, you'd probably end up in a lot more trouble."

"I should probably thank him."

"I don't think he'd be very happy about that. He probably won't tell you but it wasn't easy for him in hospital. I didn't realise quite how traumatised Wilbur was until then, or quite how much he would miss Tommy despite only being apart for a few days."

"Yeah, you've got a point."

"Techno," Phil started then stopped himself. He seemed to fumble for the right words before trying again. "Do you ever feel a bit lonely?"

Techno shook his head. "I have you."

Phil laughed slightly. "Okay but aside from me, do you wish you had a Tommy or a Wilbur with you while you were in the system?"

"Huh," the question threw Techno and he paused to give I some thought. "They seem really happy so it would be nice, I guess, but I don't think I'd be able to take it if I got attached to somebody and we were adopted separately or they got hurt and I wasn't able to help them."

"I… sorry." A sudden flash of sadness passed Phil's eyes and Techno fought back the urge to wince.

Techno didn't mind talking about the system and the horrors that came with it. He was often nonchalant about it, though sometimes this indifference seemed to disturb Phil and really bother him. Techno knew it was a feeling of powerlessness, like he felt personally responsible for the suffering Techno endured in his early life, even if Phil wouldn't meet him for another few years.

"I think," Techno swallowed loudly. "I think Tommy and Wilbur would be nice as a brother."

Phil snapped out of his own torturous thoughts to blink over at Techno, clearly surprised. "You do?"

"Yeah."

"You're not in the system anymore," Phil reminded him gently.

"I know," Techno turned to him with a smile. "Better late than never."

They didn't bring up the topic again that night. Both Phil and Techno pretended as if the conversation never even happened but it would be lying to say that Techno didn't notice a determined glint in Phil's eyes as he dished out his homemade carbonara.

He was definitely up to something and it didn't seem obvious to anyone aside from Technoblade. He didn't mention it but hoped silently that his suspicions would be confirmed.

~*~

Techno was minding his own business when he heard a shriek come from downstairs, he had been leaving the bathroom when the sound carried upstairs and caught his attention. He bypassed his room and padded downstairs.

Striding into the living room, he was immediately greeted by panicked shouting from Tommy that was punctuated every now and then with curt comments from Wilbur.

"Oh God, oh shit- fuck, what do we do?"

The first thing Techno saw was the panic on Wilbur's face. Then he noticed the growing stain on the couch.

"What happened?" He asked bluntly.

Tommy spun around first.

"Wilbur spilled his drink."

"Only because you pushed me!" Wilbur glared down at him.

"Semetics." Tommy shrugged, arms folded.

"*Semantics*." Techno added from the side-lines.

"Shut up, Technoblade."

"Can you be quiet for *one second*? Let me think," Wilbur ran a hand through his hair as he stared down at the mess with a mixture of fear and frustration.

"This is ridiculous," Tommy rolled his eyes, striding over to the door and poking his head out into the hallway.

Wilbur looked at him nervously. "Tommy what-"

"Phil!" Tommy called up the stairs, then turned to Techno. "Can you take the blame for this one?"

"What? Why me?" Techno spluttered. "I didn't even do anything!"

"Yeah but he won't be mad at you 'cause you're his kid."

"So are you," Techno answered like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

The following dumbstruck expressions from Wilbur and Tommy were enough to have him clamp his mouth shut.

"What did I miss?" Phil asked, stepping into the room and looking between the 3 of them.

Techno kept his mouth clamped shut, staring down intensely down at the carpet.

Phil frowned slightly and turned to Tommy who's mouth was hanging open. He hadn't even looked over to acknowledge that Phil was in the room.

It was Wilbur who broke the silence, turning to Phil nervously and shifting from foot to foot.

"I, um, I spilled my drink…"

Phil then glanced over at the couch, realising the stain that dyed the material a darker tone of grey.

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about. I'll grab some fabric cleaner, gimmie a second," Phil spun around and the sound of his receding footsteps were loud in the silence of the living room. Nobody spoke to each other and Techno still had yet to look up from the floor.

When Phil reappeared, he could tell the tension in the room hadn't eased. The way he studied them carefully was painfully obvious but nobody made any move to comment on it.

"You boys okay?"

Wilbur's head snapped towards him. His strained smile reappeared for the first time since he'd gotten back from the hospital and it made Techno's chest clench painfully, as he looked up through the curtain of his hair.

"We're fine."

"You sure?" Phil looked between them suspiciously.

"Yeah," Techno cut in. His face was still flushed pink in embarrassment but there was a hard edge to his voice, leaving no room to compromise. They *were* fine. Wilbur didn't have to pretend anymore.

"That's good," Phil said earnestly, applying the fabric cleaner and scrubbing at it, ensuring that the entire patch had been covered. "Let that soak in, it should be fine in an hour or so, just try not to sit on that area for a bit."

"Okay," Wilbur answered but he seemed somewhat calmer, like the storm had passed over without ever touching them.

"Techno, are you doing anything?"

"Uh, no?"

"Do you have a second? I need to chat to you about something."

Techno nodded mutely and stepped forward to follow Phil out the door.

"Ooh, Techno's in trouble!" Tommy called after him.

Techno shot him a glare over his shoulder and Wilbur smiled apologetically as Tommy tried his best to keep the jeering going despite Wilbur's attempts to get him to shut up.

Regardless of Phil's gentle tone and the light-hearted jokes from Tommy, Techno still felt somewhat nervous. Phil never really pulled him away from Tommy or Wilbur to talk unless it was serious and even then, he usually waited until he could get him on his own so that the kids had their space to bond.

Phil passed by the kitchen and went straight for his small office. He held the door open and beckoned Techno inside.

Techno could feel the nerves unsettle his stomach, sending bursts of adrenaline though his body and the familiar tingling sensation in his fingertips as he tried to keep them from shaking. He had no reason to be scared, he was with Phil – *Phil*; the man who had taken him in and become the dad he never knew he wanted or needed.

Logically, Techno knew he was arguably safest when he was with Phil but that did nothing to stop his heart form hammering in his chest.

It had to be something bad – *it had to be*. Maybe he was getting suspended after all, maybe his hard work had been for northing.

"Grab a seat."

Techno took up his usual spot on the chair opposite Phil's desk. Phil sat behind it and tried to smile reassuringly but Techno could see the strain in his eyes.

Something was wrong.

"How do you feel about Wilbur and Tommy?"

I think of them as my family.

"They're fine, I guess."

"That's good, I'm really happy to hear that." Phil paused. "Techno, you know Tommy has been through a lot in the past, right?"

"I thought he might have – didn't wanna say anything."

Phil nodded. "Right, well sometimes it means he has a bit of trouble settling in."

"So did I when you first got me."

Phil couldn't help but smile sadly at the memory of a much younger Techno still coming to grips with his new home. Learning that different didn't always mean bad and that sometimes

things weren't your fault even if you wanted to blame yourself.

"Well, Tommy's case worker thinks that he might benefit from specialist care."

"You're specialist care, right?"

"No, I'm not-"

"But you helped me!"

"I know but I'm just a foster parent, Techno."

"Where are you going with this?" Techno gripped the arm rests tightly, his knuckles white.

"She said that after Christmas there is a place opening up with a lady who is a lot more qualified than I am to handle this sort of thing."

"That's not fair! Tommy was meant to come here so he wasn't in a group home anymore."

"I know…"

Techno paused staring at Phil with eyes wide. "This is about the fight, isn't it?"

Phil shifted him his seat. "A bit, yeah."

"That was me! I'll take the blame! Put it on my record! I don't *care* but they can't just send him away!"

"Techno, I don't get to choose where they send Tommy. It wouldn't be for a little while anyway and besides this was a short-term placement, it was only supposed to last 3 months. I wasn't sure how you would handle having another kid around and agreed to take Tommy for a short amount of time to help him get some time away from the group home until somebody with more experience could help him."

Techno sat back and folded his arms. He was pointedly not looking at Phil as he ground his teeth and tried to keep his voice somewhat level.

He had finally clicked with them, he had finally grown to accept them as his own brothers and now Phil was about to sit back and let Tommy be sent away.

"What about Wilbur?"

"I don't know. I was hoping to ask for an extension after the placement was up, seeing as though he looked a lot happier recently."

"He'll be miserable without Tommy."

"He would and that's why I've got a really important question to ask you, Techno and you have to be completely honest with me."

Techno felt the sudden shift in atmosphere and he looked up at Phil, defensive posture dropped in favour of leaning forward so he could readily take in every word.

"I know I asked you how you'd feel about me fostering another kid and you said you were up for it but since they've been here I think we've all got a bit attached. *I* think of Wilbur and Tommy as my own and I can see the way they've been opening up to you and you all seem to be acting like, well, this is really corny to say but, you're acting like brothers and I was wondering how you'd feel if I asked Wilbur and Tommy how they felt about adoption?"

Techno's breath caught in the back of this throat.

"You want to adopt Tommy and Wilbur?"

"Only if that's something you'd also be okay with." Phil added quickly, while nodding. Techno's early jealously had been a lot more apparent than he had realised and he flushed at the memory.

"I- yes. I want that."

"Thank God." Phil chuckled. "I had no idea what I would have done if you had said no."

Before Techno knew it he was smiling too. The momentary panic was leaving his body, replaced with a giddy excitement that he was going to have 2 brothers. It would be official, then he wouldn't have to worry about their case worker showing up and sending them off to different places, where they'd never see each other, or Techno, again.

"When's it happening?"

"Slow down there, mate. I need to ask them how they feel about it first. They might not actually want to be adopted."

Techno huffed. It was a possibility but not one he cared to entertain. He knew that his foster brothers were happy here but Phil was right, as usual. Wilbur was definitely old enough to get a say in if he actually wanted to be adopted and though Tommy was still considered a kid by the system, Techno knew Phil would never force Tommy into anything if he wasn't fully happy with the situation.

"When do we ask them?"

"Ah, I'm not sure yet. I've already inquired but it'll take some time for all the paperwork to come through. I was thinking at Christmas? Like how I did it for you."

Techno thought of the kids as they sat down to open their presents on Christmas day, seeing their faces light up. Techno could remember Phil's knowing smile, like he could predict the way Techno's jaw would drop and his eyes would water as he was asked if he wanted to be adopted. This year Techno would be sat beside Phil, getting to see what his dad saw back when Techno was a lot younger.

He nodded with a smile. "Yeah, sounds good."

Techno had left Phil's office feeling a lot lighter, like a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders and he was finally able to breathe easy again. He tried not to skip past the living room, Wilbur and Tommy would be able to tell something was up if he started bouncing around for seemingly no reason – that sort of thing was fairly normal with Tommy but not Techno.

He poked his head inside but found it empty, so instead decided to head for his room. He still had some time to kill before dinner and there were more than a few assignments he'd been neglecting for a while now.

As he climbed the stairs, he noticed both the doors to Tommy and Wilbur's rooms were shut, which wasn't unusual but there was no noise coming from them whatsoever. Wilbur couldn't be heard playing his guitar, Tommy wasn't shuffling about and there was no chatter to indicate that they were hanging out together.

Techno would have brushed it off as nothing but their lights were on and they were definitely in there. It was strange for them to shut away so early on in the day - something must have happened.

The most likely outcome was that they'd had a fight. It was rare but since the brothers had begun opening up and growing more comfortable, Techno could see the small ways where they'd begin to clash.

Wilbur could be self-righteous and slightly pretentious. He sometimes took his role as Tommy's older brother a little too seriously and would coddle him, teasing but pushing buttons he knew would get a reaction.

Tommy on the other hand, really didn't like being called a child. He tended to get agitated and wound up as soon as his age was brought up and would lash out with mean words and insults he'd later regret.

He was a firecracker. Once lit, he would explode and sometimes hurt those around him who hadn't learned to keep their distance. Usually Wilbur was the one in the general vicinity and would have to weather most of the outburst, though Techno could hear Tommy creep out of his room in the middle of the night and knock on Wilbur's door to apologise.

There would always be a gentle coo of, "aww, Tommy," before Wilbur let him inside and drew him into a hug.

Techno pretended that he didn't hear. It wasn't any of his business after all. Siblings fought and made up all the time. It was normal. It shouldn't bother him as much as it did but he couldn't help the slight jealousy that they trusted each other completely where Techno was still walking on eggshells so that he wouldn't suddenly touch upon their deep-rooted trauma and trigger a panic attack.

Techno stood on the landing for a few seconds but then turned away. He was being ridiculous. Tommy and Wilbur would be out for dinner, which would either be completely normal or slightly tense depending on how bad their fight was.

Dinner wasn't better. Wilbur and Tommy sat in relative silence though they kept glancing at each other the entire time. It wasn't with anger or anything even remotely vicious. It was a sullen look that Techno hadn't seen before.

Phil picked up on it too and tried to figure out what had caused the shift but Wilbur was right there and ready to deflect the question each and every time.

"We're fine, Phil, don't worry, just a bit tired."

As soon as they'd finished up, the foster kids retreated to their rooms after a muttered "thanks," in Phil's direction.

As soon as their feet couldn't be heard on the stairs, Phil turned to Techno.

"What the hell was that all about?"

Techno shrugged. "I've got no idea. Maybe they had a fight?"

"Hmm," Phil frowned. "They seemed fine with each other. Are you sure you didn't say anything that might have upset them?"

"No, they were fine before but now they're just avoiding me."

"Weird."

"Yeah," Techno nodded. "Should I try talking to them?"

"You can if you want but it might be good to give them some space. If you knock and they don't answer it's probably best to leave them be."

Techno nodded and headed upstairs. He kept his footfalls quiet, as if he were having to approach a flighty animal. As he reached the top he stilled.

There was talking coming from Wilbur's room.

He kept his distance, still hiding in the relative safety the shadows provided. The door was cracked slightly and Techno glanced inside.

Wilbur was sat on his bed with his back against the wall. He had his guitar in his lap and was strumming the strings gently, it was the first time Techno had heard him play since getting his compression bandage off. He was a tune Techno had heard before, slightly melancholic but the speed at which Wilbur's fingers worked over the strings gave the melody a nervous edge, like the song was being rushed.

He wasn't singing. He wasn't doing much of anything, just letting the song pour from the instrument he held.

Tommy sat beside him, legs tucked up against his chest with his arms folded on top. The kid had most of his head buried in his little ball so only his blonde curls could be seen. Techno didn't have to see the kid's face to know he was upset.

"What-" Tommy's voice broke. "What do we do?" He was breathing through his mouth, loud gasping breaths that shook his shoulders.

Wilbur let out a sigh, his head falling back against the wall of his bedroom as he shrugged.

"Enjoy it, I guess."

Techno suddenly felt awful standing there. He was reminded of Wilbur's anxiety from when their social worker visited. How both he and Tommy had shared so much time and trauma, it wouldn't be Techno's place to intervene. Wilbur and Tommy clearly had stuff going on but seemingly not with each other and despite telling himself that he didn't do anything, Techno couldn't help but feel guilty nonetheless.

Techno hurried past to his room, shutting his door quietly in the hope that the brothers didn't catch him spying.

Chapter 9

Woah guys I can't believe how many of you are still reading this and leaving comments and kudos. Thank you all so so much, I really appreciate it!!

We're on the second to last chapter now so this is all gonna start wrapping up! Still can't get my head around the fact that this fic will be finished next week XD

The support, as always, means the world to me and I cannot thank you all enough <33

The following morning was slightly different. Wilbur was willing to hold a conversation with him over breakfast even if Tommy ignored him for the first 10 minutes before cracking and asking Techno if he could borrow his phone to message Tubbo.

Though the tension eased somewhat, neither Wilbur or Tommy joined him and Ranboo for lunch and though Ranboo asked Techno what was going on, he really didn't have much of an answer.

When Techno got home that evening after his study session in the library, he saw Tommy sat at the breakfast bar hunched over his maths homework. He was frowning like the worksheet personally offended him and the end of his pencil had been chewed to pieces. Rubber shavings littered the counter and the ghosts of numbers Tommy had erased time and time again still lingered on the page.

Tommy didn't look up at him but from the way he tensed Techno could tell that his presence was both noticed and unwanted.

Still, he ignored the dormant hostility and fixed Tommy with an indifferent look.

"Do you need any help?"

"I'm fine."

"You look like you're having a bit of trouble there."

Tommy's head shot up to glare at him. "Oh fuck off. Not everyone gets straight As."

"True," Techno nodded, calm despite the outburst. "But if you let me help with this you'll get it done faster and then you don't have to worry about doing it last minute."

"Why the hell do you care so much anyway? Haven't you got your own work to do?"

"I don't care."

It was a lie. Techno cared a lot. He wanted to be there for Tommy. He wanted the kid to come to him when he was struggling with homework or upset and wanted somebody to talk to.

"Great. Then fuck off and leave me alone. I managed before you and I'll manage now."

There was a beat of silence then Techno sighed. "Okay."

He walked towards the door, half expecting the kid to spin around and call him back but he never did. Techno tied to ignore the hurt that settled in his chest and he retreated to his bedroom.

As he passed Wilbur's room he noticed the door was left wide open. The boy was stood at his window, looking outside.

As if sensing that he wasn't alone anymore, Wilbur looked over his shoulder. Before his eyes met Techno's, his face was painfully blank, as if Wilbur wasn't entirely there. Upon seeing his foster brother he seemed to snap out of it and smile over at him.

"Techno, hi."

"Hullo." Techno paused. "What, uh, what are you doing?"

Wilbur shrugged. "Just looking out the window."

"Oh… can I come in?"

Wilbur blinked at him. "Sure."

Techno made his way over carefully, eyes taking in every detail of the room. It was pristine, almost brand new like how Phil had first arranged it. Evidence of a teenage kid living there was almost non-existent, with everything put away and the bed made up. That particular fact caused Techno to shudder. Wilbur never, ever made his bed.

He pulled his eyes away to figure out what had Wilbur's attention outside. They stood shoulder to shoulder as they gazed out over the treetops.

"You know, when we first got here, I was scared of the forest."

"You were scared of trees?"

Wilbur laughed. "Kind of. I was scared that if this whole thing turned out horribly there'd be nowhere to go. Some houses really didn't like Tommy very much and we used to be able to hop outside and go find shelter somewhere until the foster parents calmed down enough for us to go back, but when we got here it was just-" Wilbur waved his hands around. "*Trees*. Trees everywhere and we're going into Winter so we'd be stuck here."

"Is that why Tommy tries to run?"

"Oh, no. There was a few times we ended up in different housing situations. I mean, I get it, it's hard enough trying to find houses that take blood-related siblings, let alone us, but Tommy never stayed in a house for long if I wasn't there. I think that's why this house was meant to be good for him – it was in the middle of nowhere, he wouldn't be able to run back to me."

"Like a barrier?"

Wilbur snorted. "Nah, more of a deterrent. I guess they thought that Tommy would realise that there just wouldn't be any feasible way to get back to me what with being so far out. But Tommy doesn't think like that. He doesn't care if something's possible or not, he just does what he wants."

"I've noticed," Techno said, not unkindly and Wilbur nodded his agreement.

"It also meant we were trapped here – for better or for worse – and Tommy has these moments where he just lashes out and arguing with a foster parent isn't a fight you'll win so I was terrified that Phil would just get sick of us and snap."

"The forest meant that you'd have nowhere to take him if things got… bad."

"Yeah, I was um, I was terrified those first few weeks."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Yeah, it was a bit obvious."

Wilbur laughed weakly. "That's just mean."

"Harsh but true."

"Harsh but true," Wilbur nodded in agreement.

"Wil," Techno started. It was Tommy's nickname for Wilbur and something Phil had adopted as of late. He expected Wilbur to frown at him but he just raised an eyebrow in curiosity and Techno took that as a sign that he wasn't too offended. "Are you guys happy here?"

"Yeah, we are."

There was a long silence that followed where they both stood together just listening to the sound of the wind outside as it shook the tops of trees.

"I think…" Wilbur began, "I think I'd like to go camping."

"You do?"

"Yeah, can't imagine I'd be very good at it though."

"I wasn't at first, Phil had to teach me." Techno shifted from foot to foot. "It's too cold to go now but maybe I could ask Phil if we could all go together in the summer, if he gets the time off work?"

"In the summer?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds good," Wilbur said without looking at him, his voice flat and eyes still transfixed on the forest outside.

~*~

December came around quickly, bringing with it a restless wind and unbearable cold. While Techno admittedly liked winter and loved nothing more than curling up indoors with a mug of tea, it did mean that his garden would be a dead mess come Spring and there was little he could do aside from sit in the kitchen window and watch it happen.

Techno also never let Phil put the Christmas tree up in November, no matter how much Phil whined. As far as Techno was concerned, there would be no talk of Christmas – and definitely, under no circumstances, any Christmas music – until at least the 1st of December.

It was a bitterly cold evening Techno spent huddled in a blanket beside the fire for warmth. The TV was playing in the background, though Techno wasn't paying attention, scrolling through his phone instead. It was quiet; way too quiet for a house with 3 teenagers.

"Hey, mate."

"Hullo." Techno looked up to see Phil standing in the doorway. His face dropped as soon as he saw the box in Phil's hands. "No."

"Yes."

"C'mon, it's way too early for that."

"Nope, we're officially in December now, as far as I'm concerned it's basically Christmas already."

Techno huffed and tried to hide his smile as he took the box from Phil. It was overflowing with Christmas tree decorations as well as extra lights and tinsel to cover the rest of the house.

No matter how old he got, Techno still found himself getting giddy around the holidays. It meant that Phil was home more and they got to spend time as a family. Phil would blast Mariah Carey just because Techno hated that *one song* with a passion, they'd watch The

Santa Clause and pretend it made sense and Phil insisted they made gingerbread even though it always ended up burnt.

Techno wandered over to the corner of the room where Phil had stood the tree up, setting the box of decorations down nearby. It was their biggest one yet.

Years ago, Phil had tried to convince Techno to pick out an artificial tree, had told him the pine needles weren't worth having to hoover up every day but Technoblade had insisted and Phil could never quite say no when Techno really wanted something. From then on, Phil always brought home a real tree, if only to see Techno's eyes light up like back when he first came to stay.

"Have they seen it yet?"

"No," Phil shook his head. "They haven't been out of their rooms much. Do you know what's up with them? They haven't been speaking to me lately."

Techno shrugged. "They've been avoiding me too, I think. Maybe they're not good around the holidays – a lot of kids get overwhelmed."

"Yeah," Phil nodded his head, sighing slightly.

Techno felt the shift in atmosphere and scrambled to change the subject.

"You got a big one this year, I'm surprised it even fits."

"Well we've got a bigger family this time round, I wanted something we could all work on together."

Techno hummed as Phil stepped into the hallway to call up the stairs.

"Wil! Tommy! Do you want to help with the tree?"

Phil waited a moment but there wasn't any noise. After a few seconds Phil returned, looking dejected as his eyes took in the bare tree.

"I'll talk to them."

"Techno-"

As soon as Techno turned around, he froze.

Tommy was stood in the doorway, he was only halfway in the room, looking wary as if he wasn't sure if he was in the right place or not.

"Hello, big man, I, uh, I heard you call me. I'm- I guess I'm here?"

He really didn't sound too sure of anything.

"Phil got us a tree," Techno stepped aside, letting Tommy look at it for the first time. The kid's jaw fell open as he gaped. "Wanna decorate it with me?"

Tommy nodded with a kind of enthusiasm Techno was afraid the kid had lost some time over the past week. "It's bloody massive! How'd you even get it through the door?"

Phil laughed. "I've got my ways, I'm practically a pro at this point."

"Oh my God," Tommy dropped to his knees he reached out for the box of decorations, then stopped short as if catching himself last minute. He glanced up at Phil and Techno for permission.

"Go ahead, mate." Phil was clearly distraught that Tommy was still paranoid that he'd do something wrong but managed to keep himself together.

Though Techno usually wouldn't call Tommy careful, the kid was incredibly gentle in his handling of the ornaments. He plucked one off the pile, holding it close to his face so he could take in the tiny details and watch specs of glitter, glisten in the light. There was a single bauble in particular that caught his attention.

"Woah, I'm hanging this one."

It wasn't anything special in Techno's eyes. Nothing more than a deep cranberry ball with reindeer intricately engraved on the side, leaping with their front legs pulled close to their chests.

Techno much preferred the tiny violin he'd found his first year with Phil. It was a white ceramic and he remembered asking Phil if it were bone. Phil laughed, not unkindly, and ruffled his hair, Techno had let him, which was a new development at the time and assured him it was not. Despite the fact that the violin was not, in fact, made of bone, Techno still found it pretty and Phil let him hang it near the top so it wasn't at risk of being knocked off and getting damaged.

"Hey, Tommy."

The kid looked up at the sound of Phil's voice. He blinked in curiosity but Techno noticed the ever-so-slight tension in his shoulders, like he had done something wrong.

"Yeah?"

"Do you think Wilbur would want to help out too?"

Tommy's eyes shone with realisation as he scrambled out of the room.

"Wilbur!"

Tommy's voice rang out though the house and echoed off the walls. He was already strutting back into the room with a knowing smile on his face as the sound of a door being thrown open followed him. There was the distinct thundering of footsteps as they dashed down the stairs, Wilbur looked frantic as he sprinted into the living room.

"Tommy-"

"Wil! Come help us decorate the Christmas tree."

Techno saw Wilbur give the room a once-over with his eyes, realising that Tommy was safe and then sighing in relief.

While Techno wasn't too sure on the ethics of using the fact that your older brother was scared you were being hurt to draw him out of his room, he was definitely happy to finally see Wilbur aside from their run-ins during school and dinner.

There was also the fact that Wilbur was more than happy to ignore Phil but came running without hesitation as soon as Tommy called out to him. It was frustrating to say the least. Techno felt they'd taken one step forward and two steps back. Just when it seemed like they were beginning to open up, something made them retreat and hideaway and Techno knew he had to find out what it was.

"Are you sure?" Wilbur fixed Tommy with a look Techno didn't understand.

"Yeah, Phil said we could and everything!" There was a slight defensive edge to Tommy's voice like he was daring Wilbur to argue with him.

"It wouldn't be the same without you," Phil chimed in. "It's entirely up to you though, if this isn't your thing you don't have to."

Wilbur seemed conflicted for a moment, looking almost mournful at the Christmas tree, then he took in a shaky breath and nodded. "… I'll help."

Tommy beamed, grabbing Wilbur's arm and pulling him down so they could root through the decoration box. Tommy was showing them to Wilbur one at a time rambling on and on about his favourites and the ones he'd decided Wilbur was allowed to hang. The older boy's eyes widened, seemingly enraptured by the vivid colours as each one was dangled in front of his face, courtesy of Tommy. He seemed to have forgotten the room around him, blinking curiously like he'd never seen Christmas decorations up close before. With a nauseous feeling of dread, Techno suspected he probably hadn't.

"Phil, can we start decorating?"

"Just a second, mate, we need to get the lights and tinsel on first."

Tommy's smile grew wider. "We get lights too?"

"Of course, can't have a Christmas tree with no lights, can we?"

Tommy shook his head gravely like he was well-versed in this whole Christmas thing and not just learning it all for the first time.

"Wil, can you give me a hand with the lights?"

"Sure," Wilbur got to his feet as Phil tried to untangle the net of coloured Christmas lights.

"Right, if you want to grab one end – yep, just like that – I'll take the other and now if we just get closer, try and make sure they're pretty much even-"

Phil and Wilbur managed to cover the tree in lights after a few minutes of fighting with cables and working out the tangles.

"There we go. Looks perfect to me."

Phil smiled over at Wilbur and the kid preened at the compliment, seeming very happy with himself as he stood looking up at the tree.

"Okay, that's enough, out of the way, Wilbur."

Tommy shoved past him and Wilbur staggered for a moment.

"Watch it," he said without any bite and swiped at Tommy playfully.

The kid managed to sidestep him and dart behind Techno for cover.

"Is it my turn yet?" Tommy whined, arms still full of baubles he was unduly protective over.

"We've gotta do the tinsel first," Techno fished a few different ones out of the box in an array of colours.

He held them out to Wilbur first who looked at him with uncertainty clear behind his eyes. Techno did his best to nod in a way he hoped came across as reassuring. It seemed to work though as Wilbur reached out to take a length of gold tinsel, running his fingers over it in awe.

"Hey, come on, that's not fair, Wilbur got to do the lights." Tommy whined.

"Stop bein' a child, you can join in for this bit too." Techno rolled his eyes but held the others out for Tommy to choose from. Predictably, he selected the red one which Techno usually went for in the past. He knew from experience that it would glisten like rubies when the tree lights switched on and he couldn't wait to see Tommy's face.

"I'm *not* a child," Tommy fired back but he was smiling, already showing off to Wilbur.

Techno passed one of the remining lengths to Phil and kept the last for himself.

He made his way forward but noticed that the others were hanging back, Techno was about to ask what they were waiting for but noticed the way Wilbur's eyes tracked him. He was studying him, figuring out the right way to decorate a tree with tinsel, clearly scared of messing up.

Techno took the lead, being the first one to arrange his tinsel so that it draped over the branches and rested roughly in the centre of the pine needles. This way it'd be able to catch the light but also allow plenty of room for baubles to be hung.

It didn't take Tommy long to follow suit. As soon as he caught the general gist of what Techno was doing, he joined in, arranging his in much the same way.

After a few more minutes of silent deliberation, Wilbur stepped forward to join them.

Somewhere in the midst of their decorating Phil had snuck off to fiddle with the TV. Just as Techno realised his absence and spun around to look at him, he heard the all too familiar sound of Phil's Spotify Christmas playlist starting up very quietly in the background.

"This is the worst." Techno grumbled but hid a smile behind his hand.

"You love it," Phil said knowingly and Techno huffed turning away, very aware that he'd been caught.

Tommy was already dancing to the beat as he finished up the tinsel, adjusting Wilbur's constantly to 'fix' it, which Techno suspected was more of an attempt to piss him off than anything else.

Even Wilbur was humming along quietly and drumming on his leg to the beat as he worked, seemingly lost in his own world and unaware of the quiet medley that left his lips.

With the last of the tinsel in place, Phil pulled the box of decorations closer so they could all get to it, ignoring Tommy's little stash of mostly red ornaments, which the kid insisted he hang on the tree.

"Bauble time?" Tommy asked hopefully.

"Bauble time." Phil nodded and Tommy lunged for his favourite red reindeer decoration.

Techno and Wilbur couldn't keep the fond expressions off their faces, Wilbur caught his eye, seemingly shocked for a moment but then recovered and smiled gently. It felt special, like Wilbur had finally, finally acknowledged him as a part of his inner circle, like he was willing to see Techno in the way he saw Tommy – as family.

If not for the sound of Michael Bublé in the background to ground himself, Techno was sure he would have imagined it, the whole exchange being a part of some self-indulgent hallucination. But Wilbur was still smiling at him, and Phil was helping decorate the tree, and Tommy was dancing around and Michael Bublé was *still* playing softly from the TV across the room.

Eventually Techno managed to snap himself out of it and start hanging the baubles up one by one. He was always careful where he put them, working out which colours worked best together and which ones really did not.

Tommy seemed to have no such reservations. Even Wilbur looked appalled by the kid's decorating skills.

"Tommy, you can't just hang them all in the middle of the tree, we need some to go round the sides too."

"You do the sides, big man, I want the middle because my decorations are the best and should be the first thing you see."

Techno signed and Wilbur stepped in, eying the collection of red ornaments all hung very close together right in the middle of the tree.

"I've got to side with Techno on this one. That looks bloody awful."

"You're meant to be on my side! Wilbur you are the worst and I hate you, never speak to me ever again." Tommy huffed and turned to Phil. "Phil, Wilbur and Techno are being mean."

"Don't listen to them, you can decorate however you want."

"Phil agrees with me." Tommy said and held his head high, more than ready to dismiss whatever comeback Wilbur or Techno had.

"Phil's just bein' polite! He's *Phil*, that's what he *does*!" Techno cried in exasperation but was met only with soft laughter from Wilbur and Phil and playful insults from Tommy.

As they cleared most of the box, Wilbur stumbled across the violin.

"This one's pretty."

"Mhmm, it's Techno's favourite too." Phil added.

"Oh," Wilbur moved to hand it to him. "Sorry, I didn't know."

Techno shook his head and made no move to take it. "Nah, you hang it. Phil got a massive tree and I can't reach the top."

"That's 'casue you're short!"

Techno glared at Tommy but said nothing.

"If you're sure?" Wilbur still seemed uncertain.

"I am."

Wilbur hung it delicately on one of the highest branches, near where the star would go at the end.

He looked back at Techno for confirmation, who nodded his approval.

"Looks good. We can probably get you a guitar one for next year."

"*Next year*?" Wilbur jolted as if he had been shocked. He started at Techno, frozen with his eyes wide in disbelief.

"Sure."

Wilbur studied him for a moment, looking, searching for something desperately but turned away before he could reach any conclusion. Techno caught a tiny glimpse of something sad and angry in his eyes, it looked suspiciously like betrayal.

Techno tried not to think about it, reaching for another decoration only to realise that they were all gone.

He looked up at the tree, saw it alive with colour and felt proud for a reason he couldn't explain.

"Ready to see it all switched on?" Phil asked, finger already on the switch.

Tommy was bouncing with excitement, even Wilbur seemed to have mostly recovered from whatever the hell had happened a few minutes prior. Techno nodded.

"Come *on*, Phil!" Tommy couldn't help but whine.

"3… 2… 1…"

The flick of a switch could be heard, followed by a soft gasp and shout of joy.

Wilbur was looking up in awe, lips pulled into a genuine smile as the coloured lights washed over him.

Tommy was yelling to the point where Techno couldn't even hear the Christmas music anymore. The kid was leaping around, trying to take in the sight from every angle, though his favourite seemed to be front and centre where he could see his cluster of red ornaments most clearly.

Techno couldn't help but fall I love with it too. It was definitely the worst tree he'd ever seen from a design standpoint. Hell, even on his first Christmas with Phil, his decorating was never this bad but there was a charm to it. It the first thing they'd made together and he was more proud of that than he'd ever admit out loud.

"Looks amazing, I'm proud of you boys."

Wilbur and Tommy beamed as Techno toyed with the cuff of his jumper bashfully, still not quite able to take a compliment.

"Okay," Phil stepped forward and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Picture time."

"Do we have to?" Techno whined.

"Yep, just one."

Techno narrowed his eyes and glared for a moment but after a few seconds relented with a sigh. "I'll hold you to that."

"That goes without saying."

Techno mumbled under his breath but huddled closer to Wilbur and Tommy so Phil could snap a picture. Wilbur and Tommy seemed confused as they were lightly pushed into position.

It was all over in a matter of seconds and Phil was smiling down at his phone.

"Aww," he held the phone out to them. "It turned out really nice."

Like always, Phil wasn't wrong. The three of them were standing together with the fully decorated Christmas tree in the background. Techno was staring at the camera dazed while Tommy grinned widely and a shy smile tugged at the corner of Wilbur's lips. Tommy's cluster of red decorations could be seen poking out from behind Wilbur, looking a lot better now that they were mostly covered up. The tree lights caught on Tommy's blonde curls and outlined him with fuzzy colour as Techno stood beside them. If Phil were to show this picture to anyone, they'd assume they were brothers.

"Phil, Techno looks bad, we should take another one."

"That's just my face!"

"Excuses."

Techno and Tommy bickered off to the side while Wilbur held Phil's phone in a white-knuckled grip, like he had no intention of letting it go. He couldn't look away, pinching the screen to zoom in and absorb every little detail like he was trying to commit it to memory.

"Wil," Phil called out to him softly. "Are you okay?"

It took Wilbur a moment to process what he'd said, then nodded jerkily, handing the phone back to Phil.

"Yeah, I'm fine but-" Wilbur chewed the inside of his mouth, looking at his feet. "You're not in it."

"Yeah!" Tommy piped up. "You helped, you should be in it too."

Phil seemed taken aback for a second but laughed and nodded his head in agreement.

"You're right, everyone huddle."

Wilbur and Tommy were quick to comply, squashing close together and smiling in earnest now that they'd gotten the hang of family pictures. Techno secretly envied them, even now he was a little camera shy.

"You said *one* picture, Phil. You've had one picture."

"You're right. *This* is the last one – promise."

Techno sighed but shuffled closer and as soon as he was within arm's reach, Tommy grabbed him and pulled him closer so they were all gathered together. Phil held the camera up but

struggled to get everyone in frame.

"Oh my God, this is just sad." Techno swiped the phone from Phil. "Old men and technology…" he muttered, shaking his head before holding the phone up and snapping a picture, not even bothering to fit the entire Christmas tree into the background.

"Techno wait-"

Nobody was ready for it, with Phil reaching for his phone back, Tommy flailing in the chaos and Wilbur laughing with a hand pressed to his mouth. The whole picture was disgustingly domestic and candid. Techno loved it immediately.

"Done." He tossed the phone back to Phil, who caught it easily.

"Let me see," Tommy squeezed closer so he could peek, with Wilbur looming over Tommy's shoulder to get a look. "This is just awful, I'm literally not even looking at the camera."

"I like it," Wilbur shrugged.

"Yes, that's because you have no sense of what looks good."

"Tommy, you literally have a bunch of red baubles hanging on the same branch. Don't tell me I have no sense of what looks good."

Tommy spluttered and swiped at Wilbur, who just laughed brushing him off.

After their hard work decorating the tree, Phil had managed to coax them into joining him on the couch for a Christmas movie. He'd also made hot chocolate with marshmallows and whipped cream on top, which Tommy somehow managed to get all over his face.

By the end of the movie, Tommy had ran off somewhere but Wilbur remained. He was curled into a ball and slumped against Phil, he was staring at the TV absently as the credits rolled, trying to blink himself awake and failing just to catch himself drifting off and snap awake only to repeat the process.

While the movie was finished and Techno had no real reason to stay anymore he hung around just a little longer, almost afraid that if he went to bed he'd wake up to Wilbur hiding away and ignoring him again.

"Hey, Wilbur." Phil's voice was quiet, not quite a whisper but gently stirring Wilbur from sleep before he could properly drift off again.

"Hmm?" Wilbur hummed in acknowledgement. He opened his eyes just a little bit, squinting at the light from the TV as he looked up at Phil, still sitting beside him.

"I think I heard you playing guitar last night."

Wilbur came to at the mention of his guitar, finally opening his eyes and cowering back against the couch cushions. It was clear that while his mind screamed 'run', his body was still way too tired from waking up so abruptly.

"Did you…" Wilbur looked over at Techno, eyes glassy.

Techno was quick to jump in. "No, I didn't say anything, I swear."

"Wil-" Phil tried to bring Wilbur's attention back to him, noticing how Wilbur was working himself into a panic.

" 'm sorry. Techno said it was okay, I thought you wouldn't mind." He babbled, words running together and slurring slightly from the remnants of sleep.

"Wilbur- Wil, look at me. You're okay, you're fine. Deep breaths for me, you remember, right? Like we did before…"

Wilbur followed Phil's lead, sucking a big breath in, holding it, then slowly releasing it. It only took a few seconds for Wilbur to calm down but Phil didn't speak again until several minutes later.

"I'm sorry," he began. "I didn't mean to scare you. You're absolutely right, I don't mind at all. In fact, I think you're incredible. If you ever wanted to play for an audience some time I'd be happy to listen in."

"Really?" Wilbur blinked up at Phil, still tired after the long day and his momentary panic. Wilbur's brown eyes were glazed over as he stared at Phil completely unarmed. He wasn't defensive, or putting on a front. He just looked like a scared kid who'd been forced to grow up way too soon and was asking their first real parent-figure for the truth, scared to trust but do desperate to do so all the same.

"Of course."

Those two words were enough for the dam to break as Wilbur fell forward, crying quietly into his hands, shoulders shaking as he sniffled and gasped. Phil opened his arms for a hug and after a moment of deliberation, Wilbur shuffled closer, letting Phil pull him against his chest repeating reassurances into his hair.

To spare Wilbur the embarrassment of crying in front of his foster brother, Techno got up quietly, gathered the empty mugs in his hands before tiptoeing out into the kitchen to rinse them through.

It was there that he caught sight of the back garden light. He didn't remember turning it on and just figured either Tommy or Wilbur must have forgotten if they went out before. He made his way to the door, opening it enough to sick his arm out and pat the outside of the house until he made contact with the switch. He was seconds away from turning it off when he noticed a figure in one of their outdoor chairs.

"Tommy?"

He was wearing his coat over his pyjamas, shivering as the wind blew around him. Freezing cold gusts of air that pulled at his hair and stung the tip of his nose.

Tommy turned around at the mention of his name.

"Hey, Big T."

"What the hell are you doin' out here? It's freezing."

Tommy didn't reply and Techno rolled his eyes, stepping out onto the patio. His coat flapped loosely around his shoulders and he had nothing on his feet except socks to fend off the chill. Instinctively he wrapped his arms around himself as he moved to stand over Tommy's shoulder.

He was drawing?

There was a pad open on Tommy's lap and he was clutching to a black ballpoint pen. Techno knew the kids fingers had to be completely numb by now, he could already start to feel the cold set in despite only being outside for a few seconds.

"What's that?"

"Nothing."

Tommy tried to place his hands over the drawing but Techno caught a glimpse of it anyway.

It was a sketch of the garden and a bad one at that. There was the greenhouse and the vegetable patch, and the shed where Techno and Phil kept their gardening equipment. Nothing was in proportion, with the trees that made up the forest past their house looking way too small and squished in at the top of the page almost as an afterthought. Certain features had been outlined several times, like Techno's sun hat which he'd hung up in the greenhouse after Tommy bullied him for wearing it. The vegetable patch was outlined too, to the point where the lines lost their shape and it resembled more of an awkward oval with squiggles to show where Techno had planted his potatoes.

"You drawing the garden?"

Tommy paused for a moment before replying. "Yeah."

"Well you can finish it off tomorrow, it's way too cold right now."

"I can't-" Tommy cut himself off.

"You can. It isn't going anywhere."

"No," Tommy hesitated, then nodded his head jerkily in agreement. "No, it isn't."

After getting Tommy inside, Techno headed for bed. He passed Phil on the stairs helping a still sleepy Wilbur into his bedroom. Nodding his head and bidding them both a quiet goodnight.

Despite the previous excitement, Techno found himself antsy and unable to sleep. So, after a day of relishing in doing nothing Techno figured he should probably start on his English assignment so that he could at least be a little productive.

It was an hour into his work when he heard a quiet knock on his bedroom door.

"Techno?"

Tommy had poked his head past the doorframe and wasn't even trying to hide the way he looked around Techno's room curiously.

"What?"

"What are you doing?" Tommy asked, stepping inside.

Techno sighed and saved his work.

"A literary analysis of The Great Gatsby."

"Sound boring."

"It is."

A moment of silence washed over them where Tommy seemed slightly nervous as he rocked from one foot to the other.

"I can't sleep," the kid eventually muttered.

"Neither can I."

"Oh…"

Then they both stared at each other.

"Usually," Tommy began, laughing nervously. "Wilbur helps but he's asleep."

"That's unfortunate."

"It is. It really is but, uh, you're awake…"

"I am." Techno nodded.

"Right, you're awake so you could – I don't know, just be really boring and hopefully I'll pass out?"

"Lying in bed with your eyes closed is pretty boring too. You could give that a try?"

"You are an awful big brother," Tommy pouted folding his arms, completely ignorant to the way Techno's heart lurched inside his chest.

Tommy just referred to him as his brother, not foster brother – just *brother*.

"What-" Techno's voice broke and he tried to disguise it by coughing into his fist. "What does Wilbur do? Sing you a lullaby?"

Tommy flushed bright red and turned away. "Sometimes."

"I'm not gonna sing-"

"Thank God."

"-But I could read to you?" Techno finished but floundered in the silence that followed, opening his mouth hastily. "I don't have to, if you don't want to. We could so something else-"

"Can I see that one?"

Mercifully, Tommy ignored Techno's panic in favour of pointing to the paperback sitting open on Techno's desk.

"No, it's boring. You'll hate it, trust me. Why don't you pick something out from my bookshelf instead."

Tommy spun around and bounded over to the bookcase, eyes roaming over the spines of the many books Techno had accumulated over the years.

"This one!" Tommy was holding up Techno's copy of The Art of War. "It sounds badass."

Techno smiled softly, taking it from his hands. "Maybe when you're older. It's a great read but not really all that good as a bedtime story."

"*Bedtime, what?* Techno I am *not* a little kid."

"Didn't say that."

"You have – on *multiple* occasions!"

Techno ignored him, fingers trailing over his collection, hunting for something in particular, something special.

"How about this?"

He held up his collection of Greek myths. The pages were slightly discoloured but otherwise it was kept in great condition, Techno had made sure of that. It was one of the first books that was truly his and brought him back to his first Christmas with Phil. It was perfect, he decided. Tis the season after all.

Tommy scrunched his nose up.

"Looks like something my English teacher would make me read."

"Well then your English teacher has good taste." Technoblade rolled his eyes. "C'mon, we're reading this one."

"Wha- I didn't agree on that one!"

"I don't care. I'm reading so I get to pick."

"That's a stupid way of doing things." Tommy grumbled but followed Techno out of his room and down the hall to where Tommy was staying. When he got to the door, Techno stopped, letting the kid in first, at the end of the day, it *was* Tommy's room.

It was too dark to see much of what state Tommy had kept his room in but Techno didn't stumble on any clothes dumped out onto the floor so he supposed that was a good sign, even though it was a little unsettling to know that Tommy of all people seemed to be keeping things neat and tidy.

There was a quiet "oof," as Tommy fell forward onto his bead and crawled up in order to slide inside the covers. Techno followed suit and settled down on top of the duvet, upright against the headboard and reached over to switch on the lamp that sat on Tommy's bedside table.

The kid hissed at the dim light but Techno ignored him, flicking though the pages as he decided on a story.

"This is the story of Theseus," Techno glanced down at Tommy. The kid was curled into a ball tucked close against his side, comforter pulled up to his chin as he hummed in acknowledgement, settling down and closing his eyes.

Techno cleared his throat and continued the story. The words were familiar but he remembered them fondly. There was something about this story in particular he loved at Tommy's age and hoped that he would like it too.

He had a natural baritone and slight growl to his voice which usually made people think he was threatening them but here and now it sent the kid straight to sleep.

Tommy was out like a light in a matter of minutes but Techno couldn't help but read the story through to completion anyway. It wasn't particularly long but there would definitely be no time left for his assignment when he had finished.

He tried to reason that the story was one of his favourites and he hadn't read through it in a long time but knew that Tommy was the real reason he stayed just that little bit longer.

It was nice to have somebody to look after. It was nice to be relied on.

He was hit with the sudden realisation that Tommy didn't really care what they read. He was tired and likely scared of nightmares and needed his brother to help him fall asleep. All Tommy wanted was for Techno to be there and keep him company as he drifted off to sleep, with Techno's voice in the background as a reassurance that he was still there and not going anywhere.

Techno stood up quietly, shutting off Tommy's light and smiling down at him one final time before heading to bed.

Chapter 10

See the end of the chapter for more <u>notes</u>

Despite being the last one asleep, Techno was the first of Phil's kids to rise the following morning.

"Morning, Techno," Phil called from the kitchen.

"Mhmm," Techno collapsed onto a breakfast bar stool, arms folded on the counter and head resting on top. He closed his eyes, trying to cling to the final remnants of sleep.

He heard Phil coo and felt his dad's hand ruffling his hair. He grunted but was too lethargic to shrug him off, besides he was tired and it was nice to be coddled every now and then. He was usually most lenient with affection very early in the mornings or very late at night when he was too sleepy to keep up his defensive front.

"I applied to be Tommy and Wilbur's legal guardian last night," Phil said casually while flipping a pancake, catching it in the pan and setting it back over the heat of the hob.

Techno bolted upright. That was definitely a heavy weight to drop first thing in the morning - before breakfast had been served nonetheless. The relaxed tone also threw him for a loop. It was the way Phil had said it, like he was making small talk and not a life-changing decision, that took Techno's mind a second to catch up with his body which ran on autopilot and was doing a good job of embarrassing him despite not being awake for more than half an hour. He couldn't help himself, he smiled. There was no way to hide it now, Phil had seen it too and had a small glint in his eye, like he knew just how pleased Techno was without him even having to voice it.

"Will it be done before they have to go?"

"No," Phil shook his head and Techno bit back a whine. "But I get the feeling that if I ask for an extension, they'll probably give me one. It'd be cruel to send a child away from their

prospective family while the adoption paperwork is going through."

"How long's it gonna take?"

"Probably a while to be honest with you. The assessment is really annoying and there'll need to be interviews and stuff too. I'm not sure about Tommy but we definitely need Wilbur's consent because he's 16."

"He'll say yes," Techno added confidently, likely too confidently but he couldn't even think about Wilbur saying otherwise – not even willing to entertain the thought. "They both will."

Phil smiled. "Even so, I still need to be *approved*."

Techno huffed, letting his head fall back into the cushion of his arms. "It's overcomplicated for no reason."

"It's to keep kids safe."

"It doesn't do a great job. We're all a testament to that."

"Techno…"

He glanced up to see Phil staring down at him with sad eyes. It was sympathy and it made his skin crawl.

"Stop it." He bit out, refusing to make eye contact until Phil would stop treating him like he was a small child or injured animal. He was *strong dammit*.

"It's not pity, I'm just upset you had to go through what you did. It was fucked up."

"It was," Techno nodded in agreement. "But I'm here now."

"You are." The *'and you're not going anywhere'* was left unsaid but Techno felt it all the same.

Slightly embarrassed by the sentiment in his dad's voice, Techno steered the conversation away from himself. The art of deflection was something that came disturbingly easy to him.

"Anyway, I think we need to talk to Wilbur and Tommy, they've been acting weird for a while now."

"I don't know if that's the best approach. I mean, I don't want to scare them or anything."

"They're scarin' *me*! We need to do something about it."

"Like what?"

Techno was quiet for a moment then levelled Phil with a serious look.

"We should tell them now."

Phil thought for a second, eyebrows pinched in concentration before he finally nodded.

"I was think-" Phil broke off, noticing a figure lingering in the hallway. "Oh, hi Wilbur."

Wilbur was standing very still and dressed in pyjamas that looked way too big on him. The pyjama top fell around his chest loosely, he barely filled it out at all and seemed to have to pull the drawstring on his pyjama pants as far in as it would go to keep from falling down. Techno couldn't help but wonder if he'd always been this thin and why hadn't noticed sooner.

"Hello," Wilbur answered and his voice broke on the word. It was then that Techno noticed he looked very, very pale.

"Mornin'," he nodded his head in greeting and Wilbur tried a cautious smile, sitting at the dining table, despite the free seat next to Techno.

Phil shot him a worried glance and Techno couldn't take it any longer. He pushed himself up from the stool and sat opposite Wilbur at the table.

He had no idea what was up with Wilbur but there was no way he was going to sit back and pretend like everything was fine when it clearly wasn't. They were going to make small talk and have a normal conversation if it killed him and Techno was pretty sure it would. He definitely was not the best conversationalist but Wilbur had driven him to it. They were going to get along whether Wilbur wanted to or not.

"Sleep well?" Techno tried not to cringe. He tried for casual but it sounded a lot more aggressive than he meant. He made a mental note to tone it down, not try too hard. This was just a normal conversation. He could do normal.

"I- yeah, I did." Wilbur seemed confused and taken aback but he still nodded and played along, which Techno was very grateful for.

"That's good."

They lapsed into silence and Techno could tell this was going absolutely nowhere. He looked around, trying to find something else to fill the silence with.

"What's for breakfast?" Wilbur asked and Techno fought the urge to sigh in relief and thank him.

The whole conversation thing seemed to be more Wilbur's area of expertise, even if it was barely even small talk at all. They were talking nonetheless and Techno counted it as a win.

"Pancakes."

One word answers are not how to progress conversation, Techno knew this, but still nothing else came to mind. Maybe he was overthinking it. Well, he was *definitely* overthinking it but had no idea how to switch his brain off and just talk.

"What kind?"

"*What kind*?" Techno parroted, tilting his head. "Have you ever had pancakes before?"

"*Yes!*" Wilbur shot back defensively but bit his lip as soon as he said it and looked away. "No... I think so? They sell them in shops and you put them in the toaster."

"Do you mean crumpets?"

"No, I know what a crumpet is."

"Do you?"

"Yes! I meant pancakes, the fluffy round cake things."

Techno snorted and bit back a smile. "This is the saddest thing I've ever heard."

"Shut up," Wilbur pouted, folding his arms in embarrassment and mock frustration.

"You've been cheated. Those are fake pancakes and won't be tolerated around here. Pancakes are meant to be thin, you put stuff in them and roll 'em up – well Phil just kind of pulls them apart but that's beside the point."

"What are you two talking about?" Tommy groaned, rubbing his eyes and making his way from the door over to the table. He collapsed into a chair and yawned loudly.

"Food." Wilbur chimed in and Tommy hummed his approval.

Things went rather smoothly after that. Tommy had taken full advantage of the jar of Nutella Phil had placed on the table and Wilbur stuffed his pancake full of berries which Techno found to be incredibly insulting since it was way too healthy for his liking. Phil had stuck with the classic sugar and lemon, while Techno had defaulted to his favourite – maple syrup. Tommy kept whining the whole time begging Techno for a bite and then complaining to Phil when he was denied one.

It all passed in a blur of colour and laughter that just felt so normal, it completely displaced Techno's earlier worries.

In fact, breakfast had been *so* normal that Techno had forgotten all about Wilbur acting so weird. It wasn't until later that afternoon, when he caught Wilbur standing alone in the living room just staring outside with a vacant look in his eyes.

"What're you up to?" He asked quietly.

The silence around them felt heavy and Techno fought the urge to just back away and swear of social interaction forever when he didn't get an immediate answer.

It took Wilbur a moment to blink and look around as if realising where he was, when his eyes finally settled on Techno, he drew in a shaky breath.

"It's snowing." Wilbur said simply and Techno peered through the glass to look too.

"Oh, yeah."

They just stood there, shoulder to shoulder and while Techno could lean slightly and knock into him, it still felt like they were standing on opposite sides of a ravine. It was unsettling to say the least.

He had to say something to bridge the gap but that had gone so well the first time. He thought for a second. He had been too vague. There was too much room for Wilbur to dance around the question. He was deep in thought when Wilbur reached out to him first.

"How long do we have left?"

Techno felt his breath catch in the back of his throat.

"What?"

"Tommy and I," Wilbur swallowed hard. "How- how long have we got left?"

"Until what?" Techno pressed, still not quite sure what he was getting at. Techno knew he was on thin ice, that Wilbur was opening up and he couldn't afford to fuck up. Not right now.

Wilbur looked at him for a moment, blinked once and then lost his nerve, turning away suddenly. "Sorry, I- I'm sorry. Forget I asked."

Wilbur backed up a few steps and Techno noticed the way he looked towards the exit.

"Wilbur, wait. What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" Wilbur was quick to assure him but it was a blatant lie. He looked frantic, at the very edge of a breakdown. "Nothing's wrong at all. I'm just being stupid and emotional for no fucking reason and I'm really sorry, okay?"

Techno steeled himself, took a second to breathe and pushed even further. "Do you, uh, do you wanna talk about it?"

"Stop it, please." Wilbur begged quietly. His bottom lip trembled and he bit down on it, forcing back a whine as he blinked away tears. "I can't- It'll start to sound like you care and I can't right now-" Wilbur broke off choking on the words and breathing deeply to fight off the rising emotion in his voice.

"I do care." Techno insisted because it was true and there was no way he was letting Wilbur out of this room until he knew that and believed it. "You can talk to me, Wilbur."

"Don't- *please*, don't."

Wilbur seemed so *broken* and God that looked familiar. He'd been there once. He remembered being in Wilbur's position and it *hurt*. He was sure Wilbur had convinced himself it was best to not reach out and Techno had been much the same before he met Phil. A very loud part of him was screaming to leave Wilbur alone, he clearly didn't want

company right now but at the same time, if he left Wilbur in this state he'd never be able to forgive himself.

"It's okay," he tried as soothingly as he could.

Wilbur rounded on him, unshed tears glazing his eyes, lip curled back into a frustrated growl.

"No, I'm getting attached – I *am* attached. God, I *like* it here. I don't want to go away!" Wilbur pressed his face into his hands, drawing in a shaky breath before continuing. "I want to wake up in the morning and not have to worry if I'll be able to eat. I want to be able to make sure Tommy's safe and grow up with him. I like that Phil's there to calm me down when I'm scared and that I have another brother who'll look out for me."

Techno felt an ache in his chest at the outburst. He wanted to laugh, to pull Wilbur in for a hug and tell him that it's okay to want those things, that he'd never be without them again but he couldn't get the words out of his mouth and before he knew it, Wilbur was talking again.

"I like it here," Wilbur whispered quietly, like it was an admission of guilt. Like he was ashamed of himself.

"And that scares me, Techno," he looked up and his brown eyes stared Techno down. There was something terrifying and disarming behind them, like he was burning and to pull him from the wreck would involve getting hurt too. "Because when we go into these things they don't even tell us how long we have. Sometimes I end up in houses, scared I might die there before I see Tommy again because they *don't tell you these things.*

"You just keep talking about the future like I'm *actually* gonna be a part of it and I can't take it anymore! Here I am, stuck in this nice house with people who actually give a shit about me and now I'm going to lose it all in a matter of time, so I'm just trying to enjoy it but I *can't* because I'm so scared I'll wake up tomorrow and find my social worker there to pick me up." Wilbur chocked down a deep, gasping breath. "So *please*, just tell me, how much time do I have left?"

"I don't- who told you?" It was, admittedly, pathetic after Wilbur had just poured his heart out. Techno was still struggling to find what to say and now really wasn't the time for excuses, but he had to know just who put that idea inside Wilbur's head.

"I heard you. And Phil." The words were curt and icy and Wilbur looked right at home with his back to the snow, little flakes of white tumbling around his head. "A few days ago, I think? And this morning. You don't have to pretend to spare my feelings, if that's what you're thinking. I'd rather you just tell me outright."

Techno felt his heart stop inside his chest. It was a misunderstanding. Wilbur was torturing himself about a misunderstanding. He was living in fear about being sent away, losing Tommy, losing his family because he had misheard a conversation between Techno and Phil.

"Oh, my God."

Suddenly it all made so much sense, Techno had no idea how he hadn't figured it out sooner. Their bedrooms weren't tidy, they had packed their bags in preparation to be sent away. Tommy was drawing the garden so he'd be able to remember it and all the small details that made it up. That's why Wilbur was fixated on pictures, why he studied them with such intensity – it was all because they thought they were about to be sent away.

"What?" Wilbur asked with an air of caution. After his outburst he'd lost his nerve and was trying to keep his hands from shaking by fisting them in the fabric of his jumper.

"*Oh, my God.*" Techno took a step back, then another and another as the realisation hit home. This was ridiculous. He couldn't quite believe it. It was so unbelievably easy to fix.

"What is it?" Wilbur asked more forcefully. It was clear that Techno's reaction was far from what he'd been expecting and it unsettled him more than it should.

It would be so easy to tell him now. Techno felt the words on his lips but stopped himself, shaking his head. He needed the others here too. Wilbur wouldn't believe him without Phil as backup and Tommy deserved to know as well.

"Sit down," Techno ordered gently and Wilbur shuffled over to the couch, sitting up straight as he eyed Techno in what seemed to be a cross between fear and confusion.

As soon as Wilbur had taken up his place on the couch, Techno raced out into the hallway. He took a deep breath. "Phil! Tommy!"

Wilbur jolted at the sound, after all, Techno never really yelled at all. Even when he was angry, he never quite got to be as loud as Tommy, which was, admittedly, quite difficult considering the kid had no indoor voice.

"No, wait. You don't-" Wilbur began but was cut off by the sound of Tommy's voice echoing down the corridor.

"What?"

"Come here!"

"Why?"

"It's important!"

"Yeah, but what is it?"

"Come down and you'll find out!"

Techno groaned. Ever since Phil had set up his old computer for Tommy, it had been getting harder and harder to pull the kid away from his screen. Not that Techno minded, he was happy the kid was finally discovering his passion for video games, but Techno's hoarse throat was silently cursing the fact that Tommy chose now specifically to be stubborn.

"Techno?" It was Phil's voice, quieter than Tommy's and full of concern and he closed the door to his office and joined Techno and Wilbur in the living room. "You alright, mate?"

"I'm fine."

Phil looked at Wilbur who tried a shaky smile that fooled absolutely no one.

"What do you want? I was in the middle of a game, this had better be important." Tommy ranted as he trudged down the stairs, sighing dramatically and dragging his feet.

"It is," Techno assured him but Tommy made sure to bump into him with a teasing smile as he stepped into the room.

His smile faded as he saw the sheer panic on Wilbur's face and Phil's mounting concern. He spun around to look at Techno who just nodded towards the couch. "Sit."

Tommy shot him a look but did as he was told, muttering under his breath like it was little more than an inconvenience and he wasn't just as scared as Wilbur sitting beside him.

"Now." Techno said, turning to Phil who lingered at his side.

"Now?" Phil seemed a little surprised at the edge to Techno's voice but there was recognition in his eyes, catching on to what Techno was getting at immediately. He didn't seem against the idea, just surprised.

Techno looked back over at Tommy and Wilbur who were doing their best to be very, very quiet and nodded. When he spoke, he sounded steely and unwavering. "Yes."

"Okay, give me a second, I'll be right back." Phil said and then headed for his office again.

As soon as he was out the door, Wilbur was looking to him desperately.

"*Please*, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you, I swear. I won't do it again. I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it, I didn't mean it-"

"Wil?"

Tommy reached for his brother's hand, which was curled into a tight fist, and set his own on top, squeezing firmly. It seemed to snap Wilbur out of his rambling for a moment, registering that Tommy was there beside him, present and reassuring amid the turmoil of his own thoughts. Wilbur uncurled this other hand and rested it on top of Tommy's.

That seemed to be the moment Tommy realised that something was wrong and he looked over at Techno, pleading silently with an ache behind the blue of his eyes. Phil couldn't have been gone for a few seconds but the way Tommy was looking at him *hurt* and he wasn't sure just how much he could take.

"Okay," Techno breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of Phil's voice. He stepped into the room with two card files in his hand as well as a few loose papers sitting on top. "Let's do this."

Techno padded over to the corner of the room and dragged over their ridiculously large bean bag. It was an ash grey that they'd bought a while ago because it matched the colour of the couch and Techno fell in love with the soft material it was made out of. He set it down directly in front of the couch and Phil dropped into it. Techno sat to his side, back resting against the radiator.

He'd hoped it would make the whole process seem friendlier, after all there wasn't anything threatening about bean bags and it made Phil seem a lot smaller once seated. Regardless of Techno's intentions it did little to ease the tension in the room, with Wilbur and Tommy cowering and clutching at each other like when they'd first arrived in the back of Phil's car. In hindsight, it might not have been a good idea to sit next to Phil, it probably made them feel excluded, like they were being watched and judged. Techno huffed a sigh and told himself it would be okay.

"Right," Phil tried for a friendly smile. "We've all been together for going on 3 months now, and I'm sure I'm speaking for both myself and Techno when I say that we've loved having you here. The plan was a short term stay over the Christmas holidays with another prospective home for Tommy in the new year-"

Wilbur sucked in a breath. It was quiet, so quiet Techno could tell that even Tommy, who was sitting beside him, hadn't noticed. But Techno saw. He noticed the way colour drained from Wilbur's face and his hands shook as he tried to cling to Tommy like he was about to be dragged away without a moment's notice. And though Phil was going on about legal jargon, it was clear that none of it was reaching Wilbur's ears. He was frozen, like he'd just met his worst nightmares head-on.

"Hey," Techno called out softly and Wilbur flinched back as if he'd been struck. He hesitated a moment and snuck a glance at Phil who had cut himself off, looking equally as disturbed as Techno. "Are you alright?"

Wilbur nodded his head but the movement was jarring, like he was fighting against the fear that gripped his body. "I'm fine."

"Well I'm fucking not!" Tommy snapped from beside him, glaring at Wilbur in what looked to be betrayal. "This isn't fair, I don't *want* to go!"

Techno reeled, *that* was familiar. It felt like he was back at the group home all over again watching Tommy's outbursts and stubborn protests.

"You're sending me away. I can't believe you're actually- you're-" for a second it looked like Tommy was about to sink to his knees and bawl his eyes out but then, like a switch had been flipped, his face contorted into pure, all-consuming anger. "You *fuckers*. I *trusted* you. I'm such an idiot, I can't believe I *actually* fell for it. I bet you're fucking happy, you've been waiting for this since day one." He glared at Techno and Techno immediately felt sick. It wasn't supposed to go like this. "Well now you get your house back and your food and your school- oh, fuck, *Tubbo*. This is pathetic, I can't believe I'm actually- God look at this shit, *I'm crying*."

Tommy swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand, laughing bitterly at the traces of tears he'd wiped away.

Phil was frozen in stunned silence and Techno really wished he knew how to defuse this situation before it could possibly get any worse.

"Tommy, it's okay, it's fine." Wilbur's voice was soothing and he tried to steer Tommy's ire away from Techno and Phil. The boy was clearly only hanging on by a thread but still prioritised helping Tommy before himself. "We knew, didn't we?"

Tommy shook his head and gulped loudly. "I thought this time-"

"I know," Wilbur shushed him and pulled him close. Techno saw the way Tommy tried weakly to push himself away but gave up almost immediately, falling back against Wilbur's chest in defeat. "We'll be fine."

Wilbur then turned to them, smiling sadly and Techno discovered that he hated that even more than Tommy's anger.

"It's okay, we're all packed. We can go whenever." Wilbur continued gently, running his fingers through the kid's hair as he choked on another sob.

"No, Wilbur, that's not what's happening-" Phil began carefully but Techno had very little regard for careful in that moment.

He couldn't help it when he looked Wilbur dead in the eye, drew in a deep breath and shouted back at him. "*You're being adopted*!"

Any sense of delicacy was thrown out the window and if Techno were paying attention, he would have noticed the way Phil tensed beside him.

There was an awful pause before Wilbur spoke again.

"You're kidding." Wilbur bit back, jaw clenched as he growled at Techno.

"I'm not."

The distrust in Wilbur's eyes hurt more than Techno liked to admit. The kid turned to Phil and Phil nodded his head in agreement.

"Who?" Wilbur didn't look like he was breathing.

"Us, obviously! Well, Phil *specifically*, but it's sort of a package deal where you get the both of us."

"*Please*- do you mean it?" Wilbur's voice broke as he looked between them again. It was clear he was hoping for a reason to believe what he was hearing even though it didn't sound real.

"We do," Phil smiled and that seemed to do it. Wilbur's lips curled upwards before the weight in his arms shifted and he blinked in realisation. He snapped his attention back to the kid in his arms and looked down at Tommy, stricken.

"Congratulations." Tommy shifted to look up at his brother with a watery smile. He sniffled and did his best to look genuine when he spoke. "You've been tossed around the system for way too long, I'm happy for you."

Wilbur snapped his head up, holding onto Tommy just that little bit tighter.

"What about Tommy-"

"Of course we meant Tommy too!" Phil looked devastated that they'd even thought otherwise.

Tommy pulled away from Wilbur to look up at them, eyes red and puffy as he blinked away another round of tears.

"You're being serious?"

"Yes!" Techno cried, exasperated. "That's what we were saying all along!"

"I'm being adopted. *I'm being adopted*. Wilbur! I'm being adopted!" Tommy flung himself at Wilbur again who was more than happy to catch him, hugging each other in earnest now as Wilbur laughed in disbelief and Tommy wouldn't let up shouting down his ear.

"You're my brother," Wilbur mused and Tommy stilled, pulling away again, wide smile still on his lips.

"Oh, yeah."

"Might as well make it official," Phil chimed in and Tommy grinned over at them, noticing Techno and the content smile as he watched them fondly.

"*Technoblade*," Tommy called menacingly and Techno shivered where he sat. "Come here." The kid opened his arms wide and advanced on him.

"No, please. Phil!" Techno cried out before Tommy pulled him into a hug. He half-heartedly struggled for a moment until Phil sent him a look and Techno finally gave in, crushing Tommy against his chest, holding tight like it could somehow communicate how much he just loved this kid – loved his *brother*.

He held tight until Tommy let go, shuffling back on his knees to fix Techno with another grin.

Techno then looked up, noticing Wilbur staring over, still slightly unsure. Wilbur had never been one to initiate touch and Techno hesitated when their eyes locked. It felt like he wanted to be there alongside Tommy, like he was silently craving the contact too, just unsure how to ask for it. Then, before he could second-guess himself, Techno opened his arms for a hug.

He smiled encouragingly at Wilbur who, slightly bashfully, got to his feet and shuffled over.

"Come on, little brother."

Wilbur fell into his arms and snorted. "There is no way I'm younger than you."

"You are, just accept it."

"No way," Wilbur tucked his head against Techno's neck sighing happily. "Phil?"

"Sorry, Techno, Wil's birthday is before yours."

"What was that, *little brother*?" Techno could hear the smug satisfaction as Wilbur spoke.

"I hate this family," Techno said without any bite and then held Wilbur tighter just in case he couldn't hear the fondness in his voice.

It was a short while until Wilbur shifted and slid his arms from around Techno's back and blinked away tears before they could begin to fall. Techno let him go and fought the urge to pull him back. He had no idea when he had become so clingy but he definitely thought Tommy was at least a little to blame.

When he turned to Phil, Techno saw that Tommy was already hugging him and pulling Wilbur into the group hug too. He let them have their moment. After all, he'd had a dad for a couple of years now and had plenty of time with Phil all to himself. Tommy and Wilbur were new to the whole family thing, though to Techno it felt like he couldn't imagine his life without them.

"We still need to over the legal stuff," Phil muttered, trying to talk over the top of Tommy's head to avoid getting a mouthful of blonde hair.

The kid sat back with a huff. "Sounds boring."

"Oh, it is. When I adopted Techno I told myself I'd never go through it again."

"Is it that bad?" Wilbur asked with a smile but there was a slight edge to his voice which seemed convinced that it would be the thing that made Phil change his mind about them after all.

"Eh," Phil shrugged. "You guys are worth it."

"God, Phil that was so cheesy," Tommy whined but couldn't stop the embarrassed smile that pulled at his lips.

"Get used to it," he replied, without compromise. "Wil, there's a bit of extra work we need to do on your end because you're 16 but we can go through it together and get it all sorted out."

Wilbur nodded dutifully. "Sounds good."

"See, Tommy? You get perks because you're a child." Techno commented with a teasing lilt to his voice.

"You are the worst."

"I know."

Tommy cast his eyes away, bouncing his leg anxiously. "I didn't mean that…"

Techno smiled at him. "I know."

"Okay, I take it back you *are* the worst," Tommy shouted over before turning away and muttering under his breath in the worst whisper Techno had ever heard. "Fucking arrogant prick.." but there was no malice behind it and Wilbur was trying not to tease him over the pink tint to his cheeks.

"Before I go forward with anything else, I just want to make sure this is what you both want." Phil spoke up, with all eyes on him. "This is a big decision at the end of the day and I won't be angry if you don't want to but Techno and I both think of you as family and we'd be happy to have you both."

"Of course, we're staying! Right, Wil?" Tommy practically yelled the words, like it would convince Phil that what he'd said was completely ridiculous.

"Yeah," Wilbur replied with a nod, looking very serious but also very happy.

"Thank God," Phil sighed in relief. "Techno seemed pretty sure that's what you'd say but I had to check. I have no idea what I'd have done if you didn't want to."

Tommy shrugged. "You'd find some other little shits to take in or something."

"Nah, mate," Phil barked a laugh. "There's nobody else I'd have other than you two."

Techno caught the way Wilbur's brow furrowed and he opened his mouth as if to protest but then stopped himself and after some sort of internal battle, relaxed and settled into a ball at Phil's side. It would take Wilbur some time to get over that self-doubt but Techno knew they'd do it. He was already making progress and his family would be there to reassure him every step of the way.

They fell into a comfortable silence and after a few minutes passed, Techno smiled over at them. Phil was completely pinned beneath Tommy who had tried to clamber into his lap despite being much too big to fit and Wilbur who was leaning all of his weight against his side and he blinked sleepily.

"Well that was *draining*. Can we all agree to never do something like this again?"

Wilbur snorted. "But, Techno, that'd involve talking about our feelings."

"He's got you there, mate."

Techno glared at Phil in betrayal. "Wow, can't believe my own dad's turned on me."

"Well maybe if you weren't so emotionally constipated-"

"I don't remember asking the child's opinions."

"I am not a child, I'm 12."

"Sometimes you just need to not talk, Tommy."

"Do people ever tell you that you're arrogant?"

Techno huffed a laugh. "All the time."

"Well, they're right." Tommy sat back with a pout.

"C'mon, we should probably get up at some point." Wilbur whined his disapproval but let Phil sit up. "We could put a movie on or something?"

That seemed to get Tommy's attention and the kid perked up, shuffling back so he could root through Phil's DVD cabinet.

"Could we watch-"

"No."

"You don't even know what I was going to say." Tommy glared at Techno, who shrugged.

"You were going to say Up."

"I wasn't," Tommy discretely slid the DVD back into its slot much to Techno's amusement.

"We could watch a series?" Wilbur suggested. "I mean, there's no rush to finish it or anything if we're not going anywhere."

Techno nodded in agreement but Tommy wasn't having any of it.

"Urgh, no. Wilbur's going to pick something depressing or a *musical*."

"Hey! Don't talk shit about musicals unless you've actually watched one."

"If I wanted to listen to music, I'd just have you play your guitar."

That… *actually* wasn't a bad idea to Tommy's credit. Only a bit of coaxing followed by Tommy's less-than-gentle bullying, Wilbur fetched his guitar from his room.

He sat down on the couch, using the cushions to prop himself upright as he fiddled with the tuning pegs. He hadn't looked up from the floor since he had returned, instrument in hand. He would pluck a string and then tune it with painstaking care to the point where Techno couldn't tell if Wilbur was just that finicky or if he was stalling because of nerves.

Phil had sank down on the opposite end of the couch, giving Wilbur plenty of room and Tommy had claimed the beanbag, which left Techno sat with his back against the couch a short distance away from Wilbur. He rested his head back against the plush fabric, caught in the memory of Wilbur spilling his drink and Tommy trying to problem-solve by pinning the

incident on Techno. He smiled thinking back. It felt like so long ago but it hadn't been more than a few days. So much had changed in so little time that Techno's mind could barely keep up.

When Wilbur spent longer than 5 minutes adjusting a single peg, Techno blinked up at him, keeping his voice as light as possible. "You okay?"

"Yeah," Wilbur replied breathily and Techno realised he hadn't been breathing.

"You don't have to if you don't want to. Tommy's still pretty sold on watching Up so we could always do this some other time."

Wilbur laughed softly. "Nah, it's okay."

"If you're sure."

"I am," drawing in a deep breath, Wilbur let it go, shoulders falling as he relaxed and began to strum gently on the guitar.

It was a pretty melody that toed the line between wistful and optimistic. In a way that sounded distinctly Wilbur.

Phil was sitting there, his entire attention on Wilbur. He looked proud and Techno realised he felt much the same way. The memories of how scared Wilbur was when he'd first brought up his guitar were still there and Techno figured he'd likely never be able to forget them completely. Now though it was different, to say Wilbur was confident wasn't entirely true. It was clear from the tension in his shoulders that he was beyond terrified still, but there was something else there that overrode the instinct to run and hide - it looked distinctly like trust.

Even Tommy had quieted down and was more than attentive as Wilbur played. Content to listen, to be there for Wilbur as Wilbur had done for him.

It was a surprise when Techno heard Wilbur take in a quiet breath and begin singing. It was a song he didn't recognise and he had no idea if it was one Wilbur had learnt or had written himself. Regardless of the song's origin, Techno linked it in his mind to Wilbur.

When he made it to the chorus, Tommy joined in quietly and while Wilbur was really the only one keeping in tune, Tommy seemed to serve as the motivation he needed to pick up the pace, to sing that little bit louder and look up from his guitar to smile at his new audience.

Techno barely registered the falling of snowflakes behind the window. Protected from the outside world, happy to sit in the warmth and light of the Christmas tree with his family.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all again to everyone who's read this - whether you've been here since the beginning or are reading this months after I've finished writing it, I sincerely, from the bottom of my heart, want to thank you all <33

I'm working on some other sbi fics but they'll take a bit of time to get out (when they're done, I'll make sure to add them all to a collection in case anyone wants to see more)!!

In the meantime, I've made a Tumblr account - [ceakip](#) - (it's super new and idk really how to use it) but I'm more than happy to talk about my writing or mcyt so don't be afraid to say hi :D

I'll be going through this again at some point to get rid of any more spelling errors I spot but aside from that this fic is done!

Hope you all enjoyed and want to thank you again - your support means the world to me :D

Works inspired by this one

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!